

# THE INVESTIGATORS in

## THE MYSTERY OF THE SHADOW WORLD PART III: THE DARK FORCE





in

**THE MYSTERY  
OF THE  
SHADOW WORLD**

**Part III: The Dark Force**

The Three Investigators realize that the mysterious happenings at Ruxton University are a lot more complex than originally thought, with its beginnings going back some twenty years ago. Who is this notorious 'Teumessian fox' who takes the name of a mythical creature that cannot be caught? One by one, this mastermind systematically removes the people standing in the way. That leaves Jupiter, Pete and Bob—along with a surprising ally—to track down and reveal the dark force of this shadow world.

The Three Investigators  
in  
The Mystery of the Shadow World  
Part III: The Dark Force

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Part III: The Dark Force*

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## 1. The Day After

“Strange...” Jupiter Jones sat with Pete and Bob in their dormitory kitchenette on Tuesday morning and listened to the events of the previous day over cocoa and cornflakes. The First Investigator was amazed when he heard about Lemuel Garvine’s spectacular conviction.

“... Or rather, extremely strange...” the First Investigator continued. “Well, for once, I am out of action for a short time and my colleagues promptly seize the opportunity and solve the Ruxton case on their own!”

“We couldn’t stay idle!” Pete defended himself. “After the snake incident and your sudden freak-out, the next attack might be fatal!”

Bob nodded. “And because it was clear to us that Garvine was behind the whole thing, we had to get him arrested...” He cleared his throat and mumbled the following sentence very unclearly: “... Albeit rather involuntarily...”

“Okay...” Jupiter replied with steeply raised eyebrows and a gleeful smile. “Am I right in assuming that certain complications have arisen due to overhasty planning deficits?”

“We can discuss the details another time,” Pete tried to change the subject. “The main thing is that we have finally put a stop to this Teumessian creature.”

With a serious expression, the First Investigator looked over to Taylor-Jackson’s room door. “In the meantime, have you heard anything more from TJ? Yesterday morning, the doctor treating him told me that he was already on the road to recovery.”

Bob nodded. “Yes, I called the hospital again in the afternoon to check on him. If his recovery continues like this, I think he’ll be discharged tomorrow.”

“That is indeed good news,” Jupiter noted. “And how is Mr Roalstad?”

Bob’s expression darkened. “Unfortunately, it’s as bad as ever. I spoke to his wife again in the early evening. She was very curt and only said that his condition did not permit any further conversation at the moment.” He sighed. “I’ll try again this afternoon, maybe he’ll be a little better by then.”

“Let’s hope so,” Jupiter replied thoughtfully, refilling his cup of cocoa. “How did you actually get on with the campus police yesterday?”

Pete also poured himself another cup. “After our classes this morning, Bob and I will stop by the station and ask how things are going. Maybe Garvine has already made a full confession by now.”

“That would be desirable,” Jupe commented thoughtfully. “There are still a lot of things in the dark.”

“So what are you going to do?” asked Bob. “Do you want to go back to your psychology class so soon? Maybe it would be better if you took a day off.”

“Don’t worry,” Jupiter replied with a wink. “It will take more than a scratch to keep me from the noble joys of increasing knowledge.”

Pete gave a soft sigh. “I’d like to borrow a bit of your motivation. My poetry class today is on the mega-exciting topic of the ‘forces of nature’...”

“And have you conjured up something suitable yet?” asked Bob mischievously.

“At least the beginning,” grumbled the Second Investigator, pulling a folded piece of paper out of his back pocket and reading it aloud:

*As I lie down to take a rest;  
I look up and see a tree.  
That's nature at its best;  
I'm sure you will agree!*

"Aha! You can almost see the magic spark of poetry dancing above the lines," Jupiter noted with amusement. "But don't forget to ask around about Corvy as you continue your artistic development. Her sudden departure is very strange."

"Don't worry about that," Pete replied with a grin. "Your poet is quite capable of multitasking."

Before they parted, The Three Investigators arranged to meet outside Copernicus Hall after their classes to spend the two free hours together.

After the special weekend lecture, Jupiter's psychology class was now back in the usual Room 116, led by Dr Fuller. Surprised by the heavy whispering, the First Investigator realized that word of the caretaker's arrest had already spread among the students.

Now, however, Dr Fuller attracted the interest of those present. The hollow-cheeked lecturer with the unsteady gaze had just placed a box-shaped object on her desk, over which a black cloth was spread, and discreetly cleared her throat. Immediately, the general murmuring died down and a tense silence set in.

"Good morning everyone... Some of you must have attended Mrs Fernandez's special lecture over the weekend. If so, you already know what the broad field of conditioning and the various stimulus-response patterns are all about. Following on from that, today we will turn to a particular facet of behavioural psychology." With a meaningful smile, she now grabbed a corner of the cloth and pulled it down from the box. "Phobias!"

Instantly, a renewed wave of commotion rolled through the room, interspersed with several suppressed exclamations of surprise from the front rows. From his position in the centre of the room, Jupiter, as well as the students sitting behind him, could not see what was causing the commotion. With an inviting gesture, Dr Fuller now invited everyone present to come closer.

Without hesitation, the First Investigator went forward. After only a few steps and a glance at the uncovered terrarium, his suspicions were confirmed. The surprise presented was an astonishingly large animal, covered all over with thick rusty brown hair.

"*Theraphosa blondi*!" the lecturer announced, still smiling. "Better known as the Goliath birdeater. It is considered the largest tarantula in the world with a body length of twelve centimetres and a leg span of up to thirty centimetres. Females like this magnificent specimen here can reach a weight of 170 grams. And now, hand on heart, how many of you feel disgust, discomfort or fear at the sight of our little brunette?"

About thirty hands shot up in sync. The First Investigator, however, did not come forward—he had no problems with spiders. The same was obviously true for seven other students. Among them, to Jupiter's amazement, was the freckled redhead who had almost gone berserk the other day because of a common house spider. That didn't fit together at all! Maybe she was just trying to make herself important with her supposed fearlessness?

Jupiter looked at the student closely, but he could see neither fear nor disgust in her expression, only curiosity. She did not keep her distance either, but was only an arm's length away from the terrarium. That set the First Investigator thinking deeply.



Like Jupiter, Pete was surprised that many students already knew about Garvine's arrest. Amused, he overheard the various speculations about what the caretaker was accused of. The speculations ranged from a marijuana plantation in the attic to giant snakes that had broken out and were now making the university grounds unsafe.

A distinctive scent of roses announced Samantha's approach even before she settled down next to Pete. Playfully, she nudged his chin and gazed at him, beaming.

"Well, has my strong hero recovered from the battle?"

Pete blinked in irritation. He knew that Samantha had a crush on him, but he was not quite comfortable with the current situation. Had the danger they had survived together increased her feelings for him? If so, he had to be on his guard. The Second Investigator did not want to give Kelly another cause for jealousy outbreaks.

"I'm fine, thanks," he replied in a matter-of-fact way and quickly changed the subject. "Have you heard anything about Corvy in the meantime?"

Samantha wrinkled her nose briefly and stroked her brown hair. She didn't seem to like talk about Corvy at all.

"Yes, I did," she replied in a sour tone. "The nerd-girlie is fine, if that's what you want to know."

Confused, Pete blinked. "Why nerd-girlie?"

"A friend of Corvy's told me that she had received a scholarship to Yale, which she had originally hoped for," Samantha explained with audible envy in her voice. "Due to some technicality, I guess the notification was delivered late." She snorted contemptuously. "As soon as Corvy got the news, she left. I guess saying goodbye to us was beneath the dignity of 'Miss Yale'."

Pete frowned. Corvy's departure without comment was indeed a little strange. On the other hand, a scholarship to Yale was something to shout about. After all, this university was one of the best in the country. In the exuberance of emotions, one could sometimes forget to say goodbye.

Before he could think about it further, Miss Berany pranced into the room, smiling dreamily. As always, she wore her straw hat with the bright red rose. Her emerald green jute dress and lemon yellow stilettos completed her quirky outfit. After a little pirouette in front of the whiteboard, she turned to the students and spread her arms radiantly, as if she wanted to embrace the whole world.

"Greetings, children of poetry! Now please take out your poems that you have written on the theme of the 'forces of nature'."

A fierce rustling started and Pete also took his note with the glorious tree verse out of his trouser pocket.

"If you have written the poem in a pad or notebook, please detach it and take the piece of paper firmly in both hands," the lecturer continued.

Astonished, everyone followed the instruction.

"And now..." Miss Berany's eyes glittered euphorically, "crumple it up and throw it in the air!"

At first Pete assumed it was a joke. But as more and more female students crumpled up their notes and threw them up giggling, he joined in too.

"This is nature!" the lecturer cried ecstatically. "It is unpredictable, capricious, powerful!" With an expansive gesture, she pointed to the many white paper balls on the floor. "Nature cannot be constructed and pressed into preconceived schemes! It wants to breathe... flow... thrive!"

The birdie under her hat was certainly thriving, Pete thought, shaking his head. Everyone else, on the other hand, seemed very enthusiastic and was hanging on Miss Berany's every word.

With a delighted expression, the lecturer looked around. "A poem about nature must not be tamed by rhyme and meter. It must be free! Therefore, close your eyes now, go deep within yourself until you feel this free, unbridled power, and then write down your sensations! There are no rules... no constraints... no structures—only the pure energy that flows through you. Bring it up and let it flow through the room!"

A grim smile flitted across the Second Investigator's face. He felt something was really coming up for him, but it certainly was not meant to flow through the room...

## 2. A New Lead

Bob gave a soft sigh and let his chin sink down on his folded arms. He had not expected Professor Haynethorp, Mr Roalstad's replacement, to be as great and humorous a lecturer as his predecessor, but he had not expected such a stark contrast. Trevor Haynethorp, a spindly man in his late fifties with a pointed chin and a silver-grey fringe of hair, was in almost every respect the absolute opposite of Mr Roalstad—namely, deadly boring.

"Let us now turn to the chapter 'Journalism Ethics in the Information Age'," the professor announced monotonously. "You will find references to relevant academic papers in the handout beginning on page nine..."

Yawning, Bob scrolled to the relevant page. Suddenly someone tapped him so hard on the shoulder from behind that he flinched in surprise. Irritated, he turned around and looked into the scowling face of the know-it-all Phil Sanders, who had already got on his nerves several times.

Phil held out a folded piece of paper to Bob and grumbled: "This isn't primary school anymore, Andrews. My time is too precious for such childish games!"

"Er..." Puzzled, Bob took the note and realized that in small block letters it had his name on it. "Who is this from?"

Wordlessly, Sanders pointed to the blonde student to his left, who in turn shrugged her shoulders and pointed behind her. So anyone here in the room could be the sender.

Frowning, Bob turned back around and unfolded the paper. His eyes widened in amazement as he read the lines written in felt-tip pen:

*Must meet you. At break time, by the bike racks at the south exit. I know where the foxhole is.*

Bob was electrified by the news. Someone wanted to meet him to tell him where the Teumessian fox's 'den' was! According to this, Garvine's house was obviously not his actual base. But who was the unknown person who now wanted to contact Bob so suddenly? And why did he do it in this strange way instead of contacting the campus police with his important clues?

Unobtrusively, Bob let his gaze wander around the room. None of the students looked over at him or otherwise made a suspicious impression. Bob thoughtfully put the small note in his pocket.

Involuntarily, the message had reminded him that The Three Investigators had defeated the Teumessian fox, but still had not solved all the mysteries. With an uncomfortable tug in the pit of his stomach, he realized that this did not only apply to Garvine's secret foxhole. In the triumphant feeling of the last few hours, Bob had not even thought about the fact that his father's role at that time was still in the dark as well...

Finally, the first half of the lecture was over and there was a fifteen-minute break. In front of the south exit of the building, he headed for the bicycle racks and bent down as if to tie his shoe.

Suddenly, he was approached from the side.

"Sit on the bench to your left and pretend you're typing something into your phone."

Instinctively he looked around, but immediately the voice admonished him: “Don’t look over at me! I don’t want people to know we’re talking to each other.”

Bob obediently lowered his head again, walked over to the bench and sat down. At least the brief glance had been enough to realize that he was dealing with a dark-blond woman in her early twenties who was sitting on a ledge behind the bench. Bob knew her vaguely from his journalism class. She had tied her curly hair into a ponytail, wore elegant glasses and held a mobile phone to her ear. Apparently she wanted people passing by to think she was talking on the phone.

“May I ask who you are?” asked Bob as he pulled out his own mobile phone and tapped away on it.

“My name is Ivy. Ivy Fleming... This morning I learned that you hunted down Garvine the... fox.”

Bob stumbled. “Oh yeah? And who did you hear that from?”

“From Samantha. Like me, she’s from Torrance, where we live just a stone’s throw from each other. We’ve been friends for a long time, so she took me into her confidence.”

“Okay...” Bob replied curtly. He was still suspicious. “What do you know about the fox?”

“I’ve been studying politics and media studies at Ruxton for three years now, but I want to switch to journalism.” She paused for a moment, as if considering whether she really wanted to keep talking. “In... the past semester, I dealt intensively into the university legend surrounding the Teumessian fox, and I finally came across the trail of Garvine and his second identity.”

“Great work!” Bob raised his eyebrows appreciatively. “And then what happened?”

Ivy sucked in an audible breath, then continued in a trembling voice. “I made... a mistake. One night, I wanted to shadow him and I secretly followed him to the west area of the campus. But then I lost sight of him. When I wanted to return to my dorm, he suddenly grabbed me from behind and pressed something on my mouth. Then I lost consciousness.”

Concerned, Bob paused. “Did he... do something to you?”

The student’s voice was now just a pressed whisper. “When I... woke up, I was with Garvine in his house. I was sitting next to him at the kitchen table where... there was a big terrarium. It was teeming with snakes—disgusting black snakes.” Again she faltered and sobbed softly.

“What did Garvine do?” asked Bob anxiously.

“Nothing... He just sat next to me. After a long while, he suddenly raised his hand, pointed at the snakes and said: ‘If you tell anyone about me, you will have visitors at night... and believe me, when they get to you, it will already be too late.’ At that, he slowly stroked my arm.”

Bob was stunned. “Oh my goodness...”

### 3. A Giant Spider

Dr Fuller looked expectantly around the room. “And now the supplementary question—who among those who came forward has ever been attacked or bitten by a spider?”

All hands lowered again. The lecturer nodded. Apparently she had expected this result. “So from a rational point of view, there is no reason to be afraid of this fascinating animal. Does anyone know what psychological phenomenon we are dealing with here?”

“‘Arachnophobia’,” Jupe answered as if shot out of a gun. Only then did he realize that he had spoken without being prompted. “Oh, sorry.”

“It’s all right, Mr Jones,” Dr Fuller placated with amusement. “Enthusiasm is a commendable trait. Can you perhaps also explain the origin of the word?”

Jupiter nodded. “The term is derived from the ancient Greek words *arachne*—spider, and *phobos*—fear.”

“Excellent.” The lecturer turned to the terrarium and pointed to the huge tarantula still crouching motionless in a corner. “Fear of spiders is one of the classic anxiety disorders we call phobias. Phobias express themselves through massive states of panic, which can lead to sweating, circulatory problems, dizzy spells and vomiting. The characteristic feature is that the strength of the reaction, that is, the intensity of the fear, is out of proportion to the stimulus that triggers it. Thus, one is afraid of something that does not give rise to such a degree of fear.”

Encouragingly, Dr Fuller looked around. “Does anyone know of any other phobias?”

Several hands shot up, including Jupiter’s. This time, however, the lecturer chose a student with short brown hair.

“‘Claustrophobia’—the fear of confined spaces, for example lifts.”

“Excellent! And what do you call the opposite—the fear of wide open spaces?” Again, several students raised their hands, of whom a blond with a three-day beard was chosen.

“‘Agoraphobia’... and the fear of heights is called ‘acrophobia’.”

“Aha! A real expert, it seems.” The lecturer smirked. “Between you and me, I have absolutely no fear of heights.”

In the minutes that followed, several other phobias came together. In addition to ‘cynophobia’—the fear of dogs, and ‘aviophobia’—the fear of flight, there was also the fear of injections, which Dr Fuller expertly called ‘trypanophobia’. Finally, she contributed a barely pronounceable word monster called ‘paraskavedekatriaphobia’—the fear of Friday the 13th.

“Strictly speaking, fear is a natural emotion that protects people from harm when they face real and imminent danger,” the lecturer summarized the brainstorming. “In contrast, phobia is an excessive fear or anxiety related to specific objects or situations that are out of proportion to the actual danger they present.”

“And how does such a phobia develop?” a stocky student with nickel glasses wanted to know.

“The causes can vary greatly from person to person. Sometimes the development and consolidation of a phobia is actually based on a real threat experience. Does anyone know an example?”

“My sister,” said a student dressed all in black and wearing various earrings. When the others started laughing, he realized that his answer was misleading. “Uh... I didn’t mean that my sister was the threat, of course, but that she had experienced one. She was once bitten by a terrier when she was a child and has been terrified of dogs ever since. She even has to cross the street when she hears dogs barking in a garden.”

Dr Fuller nodded sympathetically. “A very vivid example of the consolidation of a ‘cynophobia’.”

The student with the short brown hair then remarked: “So a single negative incident can lead to the development of a general fear of the cause, for example, dogs.”

“Correct,” Dr Fuller confirmed. “The traumatic experience of a specific danger can strongly encourage the development of a phobia. In the vast majority, however, we are dealing with phobias whose triggers, such as a lift or an enclosed space, are not rational causes for fear.”

Smiling, she pointed to the tarantula. “A prime example is Clarice, my eight-legged assistant. To no one in this room does she pose the slightest risk. Yet three quarters of those present feel uncomfortable, disgusted or even fearful at the sight of her.”

Jupiter frowned. Strange, he thought, that a certain student, who recently freaked out in front of a much smaller spider, was not one of the three quarters...

Furtively, Pete blinked over at Samantha. She, like most of the other students, still had her eyes closed and was breathing deeply in and out. She actually seemed to be trying to activate her ‘primal energy’ to let it flow into a poem about unbridled nature. In contrast, the only thought that had occurred to the Second Investigator when he closed his eyes was that he would like to take a nice nap now.

Nervously, he realized that some of the female students had begun to write eagerly in the meantime. Obviously, the energy currents were already flowing strongly. Samantha also pulled out a pen.

Tensely, Pete bit his lower lip. No matter what it cost—he absolutely had to get something down on paper! But how could he do that if he didn’t know how to tap into that stupid energy inside him? He felt like a treasure hunter who had been dropped off on a mountain and was now supposed to dig for gold with a plastic spoon. No chance... He convulsively tried to concentrate, but his mind was in chaos.

“Five more minutes, my dears!” the lecturer purred.

“Go on—write something!” Pete urged himself, but the seconds ticked away mercilessly between his fingers. Most of the students had already put down their pens. Only the Second Investigator was still staring at his blank paper, as if expecting some magic writing to appear there any minute. But nothing came...

Just one more minute... There was no other way—he had to at least pretend to write something down... and then he had to hope that he wouldn’t get picked. Without thinking any further, Pete scribbled away, frantically adding one letter to the next.

Now Miss Berany raised her right hand. “Now please add your name. Due to time constraints, we will only be able to listen to and discuss a few of your creations. But so that nothing is lost, I will collect your work afterwards so that I enjoy all of them in peace and quiet.”

A loud moan made everyone look up puzzled. It was Pete. He just couldn’t hold it back.

The lecturer looked at him, beaming. “Mr Crenshaw, I am pleased to announce you are the first to grace us with your energy poured into words. Go ahead—the stage is all yours!”



#### 4. Unexpected Triumph

“But isn’t it quite normal to be afraid of a poisonous animal like a tarantula?” A student with dark brown dreadlocks wanted to know. “That’s a completely natural protective reflex, isn’t it?”

“First of all, the bite of tarantulas native to this area is not serious to humans unless an allergic reaction occurs,” Dr Fuller replied. “The same applies to many giant tarantulas that live in the tropical forests of South America, to which Clarice belongs. Apart from that, however, I quite agree with you. Here in California, it is undoubtedly sensible to have a healthy degree of respect for highly venomous arachnids such as the brown spider or the notorious black widow, for example. It becomes critical when the ‘how’ of the reaction is out of proportion to the ‘what’ of the stimulus.”

“For example, when you panic at the sight of a harmless house spider,” Jupiter concluded.

“Exactly. It is characteristic of the pathological fear of spiders that it is found all over the world, even in northern regions where there are no spiders that are dangerous to humans. Can anyone think of an explanatory model for this irrational fear?”

The blond student with the three-day beard spoke up again. “I once read that arachnophobia is genetically anchored in humans. Thousands of years ago, when there were perhaps much bigger spiders than these, a single poisonous bite could mean instant death. So in the course of evolution, humans learned to fear arachnids out of self-protection.”

Dr Fuller nodded. “That is indeed a common theory.”

“For me, the worst thing about spiders is that they suddenly and silently appear right next to me,” explained a pale student with waist-length chestnut hair. “You’re sitting somewhere or just lying comfortably in bed, you turn around—and suddenly there’s some hideous, long-legged critter on the wall!” An amused, sympathetic murmur went through the room.

“Besides, these beasts are really fast. It once took my mother half an afternoon to catch such a fat, black spider in our living room. Mum went half mad.”

“‘Mother’ is a very good keyword from a behavioural psychology point of view,” the lecturer noted with a smile and looked around. “Does anyone have an idea why?”

This time it was Jupiter’s turn. “If fear is not genetically determined but a learned behaviour, the personal environment naturally plays a major role. Young children orient themselves on the behaviour of their parents, siblings and other relatives. If one of them suffers from arachnophobia, the child experiences this fear very intensively and ‘learns’ that all spiders are evil and dangerous.”

Dr Fuller beamed. “Excellent to the point. The theory of learned behaviour is also supported by the fact that arachnophobia is almost unknown among primitive peoples who are confronted with spiders of all kinds on a daily basis.”

The pale student smiled wryly. “Too bad my mother didn’t grow up in the jungle...”

After the students had sat down again, Dr Fuller reported on various therapeutic measures for the treatment of arachnophobia as the class progressed.

Shortly before the end of the lesson, she stood up and took a few steps into the hall. “Finally, as an encouraging example for all sceptics, I would like to offer one of you the



opportunity to have a little rendezvous with Clarice. So whoever is brave enough, step forward now.”

Jupiter had already half risen when he paused, aghast. The red-haired student, who had panicked because of a common house spider, had just jumped up and was now sauntering to the lectern.

“Ladies and gentlemen, we have a candidate!” announced Dr Fuller, beaming, gently taking the spider out of the terrarium and placing it on the completely relaxed-looking redhead’s outstretched hands, amid quiet ‘ooohs’ and ‘aaahs’ from the audience.

Jupe could hardly believe what he was seeing. The smiling student now slowly walked down the rows so that everyone could catch a glimpse of the huge tarantula, which moved one of its hairy legs every now and then. At the same time, the girl radiated a composure as if she were holding a cute hamster in her hand...

Pete felt as if his trousers had just been pulled down and a big spotlight shone on him.

“Uh... sorry, that... was a misunderstanding. I... didn’t actually mean to—”

“Don’t be modest, Mr Crenshaw,” Miss Berany said with a smile. “Let us share in your latest creation!”

More than thirty pairs of eyes were curiously fixed on him. There was no turning back. Hesitantly, Pete stood up and looked at his piece of paper. Only now did he realize with horror what exactly he had just scribbled down in all capital letters. Desperately, he wanted to make one last attempt to avert disaster, but there was simply no way, unless he ate the note. He was just wondering what chlorine-free lined paper tasted like when Alexandra, sitting to his left, gently nudged him with her foot under the table.

“Go on, amaze us, Mr Crenshaw,” Miss Berany urged. “Just read what you have written...”

For a brief moment, Pete closed his eyes and took a deep breath. Then he stood up, looked at the words on his piece of paper and began to recite in a firm voice:

*FEGARR MABKTLERAN  
LOMKTESI TWARAK  
YIABSFJUM KTVAHII  
TRUCABO MHEHG.*

When Pete finished, there was dead silence in the room. He didn’t dare look up, but just stood there, silently awaiting the resounding laughter that would undoubtedly break out in a few moments...

At that moment, the Second Investigator paused, perplexed. He had just heard a sound that sounded like soft clapping. Hesitantly, he looked forward and, to his utter amazement, saw the lecturer clapping her hands reverently. No doubt—there was indeed admiration in her gaze.

Gradually, the students joined in the applause, at first timidly and uncertainly, then more and more euphorically. Finally, the applause had grown into a veritable storm of enthusiasm. Stunned, Pete looked into the faces of all the rapt girls and thought—if Kelly were here now, there would be a mass brawl...

As the applause gradually died down, Miss Berany pointed appreciatively at the Second Investigator, who was still standing stock-still.

“What an impressive demonstration of a pure, unleashed linguistic expression! Not only did Mr Crenshaw rise above all verse and rhyme structure, but he went right to the root of all

word meaning and severed it. He overcame the ancient walls of our linguistic prison of meaning and let pure energy resound from the battlements of the conquered fortress.” Eyes shining, she looked around the room. “Ladies... we have an archaic poet among us!”

## 5. Location of the Foxhole

Ivy continued haltingly. "Then... he got up and let me go without saying anything else. Since then, I've stopped researching on Garvine and never said another word about him again." She cleared her throat and struggled to compose herself. "When Samantha told me today that you had him arrested, to me, it was a relief."

"Understandable." Bob hesitated. "But if you had important information about him or the foxhole, you could have given it to Samantha or the campus police by now. Why the need for this secrecy?"

"I don't want my name or Samantha's name dragged into this. Garvine may have had accomplices among the students or staff who are now watching everything."

Bob nodded thoughtfully. "True, until that's sorted out, I'd probably be careful too if I were you." He sighed softly and smiled sarcastically. "On the other hand, Garvine already knows that my friends and I are on to him, so it won't matter now if we blow up his foxhole. Where exactly is he hiding?"

"I'm pretty sure it's the big equipment shed behind the botanical garden," Ivy replied, now more composed. "Several times I've watched him go in there after dark and stay there for an inexplicably long time, once even half the night."

Bob narrowed his eyes thoughtfully. "That is indeed very unusual."

Ivy nodded. "Of course I tried to take a look inside, but the shed has no windows and Garvine is always careful to keep the door locked at all times. Once I saw him snapping violently at two of his staff just because they'd asked for the key."

"So he was the only one who had access," Bob concluded, clenching his fists thirstily. "Now it's just a matter of uncovering Garvine's last secret which he's hiding in the shed." In his mind he added: "And maybe then we'll finally find out what Dad had to do with the whole thing..."

As expected, the second half of the journalism lesson was just as dull and dragging as the first, but Bob did not care at all about Professor Haynthrop's monotonous explanations. All the time, his thoughts were circling around Garvine's equipment shed and the secrets he kept hidden in it. Would it finally become clear what was hidden behind the façade of the Teumessian fox and what exactly had happened back then when Bob's father was hot on his heels?

After the class was finally over, Bob went to the arranged meeting point in front of Copernicus Hall. However, The Three Investigators could not start their meeting immediately, as Pete first had to get rid of several female students who were enthusiastically talking to him and bombarding him with excited questions about his 'incomparable poetic expressiveness'. Samantha Shirona stood off to the side with a jealous expression, finally turned demonstratively snorting and stomped off with her nose up.

After another five minutes, Pete finally managed to extricate himself from his enthusiastic fans by pointing out that it was now high time for him to regenerate his creative energies. Sighing in exhaustion, he walked over to his friends.

Jupiter looked mischievously at him. "I hereby would like to humbly take back my irony from earlier. You actually have your own fan club!"

"Don't let Kelly hear you say that," the Second Investigator replied annoyingly. "She mustn't find out about this whole morning under any circumstances."

"Our lips remain sealed," Bob promised, amused. "Besides writing poems, did you have time to ask about Corvy?"

Pete nodded. "Yes, I did. The whole thing is quite strange." In terse sentences, he told his astonished friends about Corvy's sudden transfer to Yale.

"This is surprising news, though," the First Investigator noted.

"Speaking of surprises, I have one of those too," Bob said and told about his meeting with Ivy and her suspicions about the foxhole.

Jupiter then tapped his chin thoughtfully. "In view of the new state of affairs, I suggest you postpone your visit to the police station for a little while."

"You mean we should look around the equipment shed first?" asked Pete.

"Yes, that's exactly what I mean. If Garvine is indeed hiding some secret there, we should check out the shed first before informing the campus police."

Frowning, the First Investigator looked over at the large administration building. "After all, it's quite possible that someone might get the idea to cover up one or two findings so that Ruxton's reputation wouldn't be damaged..."

## 6. The Monster in the Lab

Barely ten minutes later, The Three Investigators arrived at the equipment shed a bit away from the botanical garden. The windowless building was much larger than the boys had expected. The massive metal door was also a stately size and more reminiscent of a garage door. Fortunately, the shed was surrounded by a few pine trees, which provided some privacy.

After inspecting the modern lock, Pete set to work with his lock picks. After just a few seconds, a soft click indicated that he had done it. With a satisfied smile, he pushed down the latch and whispered: "Open Sesame!"

The first look inside, however, was sobering. On both walls were ceiling-high shelves with loads of dirty cleaning and gardening tools. A musty smell of damp earth and fertilizer hung in the room.

"Just everyday gardening stuff," Pete noted.

"Well, it was hardly likely that Garvine would have placed his secret on a silver platter right behind the door," Jupiter replied. "I guess we'll have to put in a little work..."

Before closing the door, the First Investigator flicked a light switch, which he found to his right. Two ceiling lamps flared up and poured cold white light into the shed. At the back of the shed, Bob spotted an imposing lawnmower tractor painted red.

"Now I understand why the door is so big," he noted. "After all, such a vehicle needs space."

Carefully, the boys began to examine the shed. After a few minutes, Jupiter faltered. "Fellas, I have just noticed a strange discrepancy. From the outside, I would estimate the shed to be twelve metres long and six metres wide. But from the inside—"

Astonished, Pete looked around. "That's right! It's not as big in here! Even if you take out the shelves, it's probably eight metres at most in length. So there must be a hidden room at the back!"

"Very well deduced," Jupiter praised and went to the back wall. He leaned forward listening and knocked. "Aha! That's definitely metal behind the grey wall paint!"

The Three Investigators eagerly searched through all the shelves on the back wall of the shed, clearing away cleaning buckets, scouring agents, rakes and shovels, but did not find anything at first.

Suddenly, Bob paused and ran his fingertips over a barely visible edge in the wall. "Hey! I think there's something here!"

Immediately Jupiter and Pete were with him and looked at the discovery. Indeed, when they looked closely, a horizontal, wafer-thin line about eighty centimetres long could be seen at head height, from both ends of which two vertical lines reached down to the ground.

Bob beamed. "A real secret door! If I hadn't moved away the stuff on the shelf, I wouldn't have noticed it at all."

"And look," Pete exclaimed, "this metal shelving unit has wheels so it could be easily moved away from the wall." The three of them then pulled the shelving unit away from the wall.

“The only thing missing is the opening mechanism...” the First Investigator murmured, lost in thought and walked towards a folding table that stood to the right of the tractor. On it, besides some tools, was an old-fashioned green push-button telephone that had caught his interest.

“Do you want to make a phone call now?” asked Pete in surprise.

“Even if I wanted to, it wouldn’t be possible with this,” Jupe replied tersely, holding the device aloft. “No cable. This phone is not connected.”

“What’s with it?” replied Bob, irritated. “It’s only an old telephone. There’s nothing special about it.”

“If it is in fact a disguised remote control, then perhaps it is special,” Jupiter replied dryly.

Astonished, Pete stepped closer. “What makes you think of that?”

“For one thing, this thing is far too light.” The First Investigator turned the device over and looked at the bottom. “For another, the battery compartment here is a clear indication that it serves some other function.”

“You mean... this thing might open the secret door?” asked Bob incredulously.

“That is exactly what we have to find out. The condition of the keys provides us with a certain starting point. Some of them shine more than others, namely the ‘3’, ‘6’, ‘8’, and ‘9’.”

“So the combination to open the door could consist of these four numbers,” Bob concluded. “The only question is in which order they have to be pressed.”

“How are we supposed to find that out?” grumbled Pete. “There are lots of different combinations!”

“10,000 different combinations,” Bob added. “If some numbers are duplicated... that would be a lot more...”

Jupiter looked at his friends urgently. “We must not be discouraged, fellas. So, think—what can you think of for the numbers ‘3’, ‘6’, ‘8’, and ‘9’?”

Over the next few minutes, the boys went through various possibilities, from the postcode of Ruxton to Garvine’s mobile phone number, but none would match the four numbers.

Annoyed, Bob snorted. “We’re standing so close to that darn foxhole and we can’t get in!”

“The fox...” murmured Jupiter as his pulse rate quickened. “Maybe that’s the solution!”

“How could that be?” asked Pete, perplexed.

The First Investigator pointed excitedly at the keypad. “As you know, each key on a telephone is assigned a certain series of letters—‘A’, ‘B’ and ‘C’ to ‘2’; ‘D’, ‘E’ and ‘F’ to ‘3’; and so on.”

“I see,” Bob snapped. “So maybe the combination is not based on numbers, but on letters!”

“And these letters could be ‘T-F-O-X’—Teumessian fox!” Jupiter replied with flashing eyes. “Look at this! The ‘T’ corresponds to ‘8’; the ‘F’ to ‘3’; the ‘C’ to ‘6’; and the ‘X’ to ‘9’!” He reached for the phone. “We’ll soon find out...”

And indeed—no sooner had he pressed the numbers 8-3-6-9 than a bright beep sounded and the secret door swung backwards with a low hum.

“You did it, Jupe!” cheered Pete.

“Not so loud!” hissed Jupiter indignantly. “After all, we don’t want to draw anyone’s attention to our exploratory visit.” With the familiar twinkle in his eyes, he turned to the opening in the wall. “Well, let’s see what Mr Garvine has hidden here with so much effort...”

The tension in the shed was palpable as the three boys slowly approached the opening, which was now illuminated by bright lights that had obviously been activated automatically. Standing just outside the doorway, they paused, spellbound, and let their eyes wander.

“The secret lab of the Teumessian fox...” Pete breathed in fascination. Immediately, movie associations of the research section of a spaceship flashed through his mind.

In fact, it would have been hard to imagine a stronger contrast to the musty equipment shed. The entire furnishings shone in immaculate splendour—two long steel lab tables surrounded by strange apparatus, several chrome-plated wall cabinets and countless test tubes, round flasks, Petri dishes, measuring cylinders, glass tubes and cables that disappeared into grey floorboards. The silvery metal walls of the elongated room reflected the glare of the bright white lights. Everything looked like a scene from a science fiction movie.

It would not have surprised the Second Investigator at all if there had been a strapped-down alien with a spherical head and huge black eyes lying on one of the laboratory tables, being examined here for ultra-secret research purposes. Instead, he saw several terrariums, the contents of which he could not see clearly from the door.

Curious, he was about to enter the room when Jupe suddenly cried out: “Stop! Don’t go in!”

But it was already too late—Pete’s foot had already touched the floor of the lab. At the same moment, a click sounded and sheer chaos broke loose.

From one second to the next, the light in the lab began to flicker violently. A piercing hiss flooded the room and suddenly an inhuman roaring figure appeared from the right, stretching its clawed hands towards Pete! The nightmarish creature possessed a human torso completely covered with shaggy auburn fur, but instead of a face, a horrifying animal mug with glowing yellow eyes stared at the Second Investigator. The elongated snout was wide open and bared pointed fangs.

“The Teumessian fox!” cried Bob in horror.

Pete was literally paralysed by the shock. When the monster’s hideous mouth was only a few centimetres away from his face, Jupiter suddenly grabbed Pete by the shoulders and yanked him backwards.

“Take cover!” Jupe yelled.

Only a split-second later, a yellowish cloud of steam poured out of the fox-man’s throat and billowed over the boys’ heads.

“Don’t breathe in!” warned the First Investigator, holding a hand protectively over his mouth. “Now get out of here!”

In a panic, the boys ran through the equipment shed, where the bright white lights were now also beginning to flicker. Bob had already reached out for the door handle when the light went out completely. Surprised, he stumbled, banged his head against the door and, staggering back, clashed into Jupiter and Pete so hard that all three went down.

“Help me—the beast has grabbed my leg!” shouted the Second Investigator.

“Nonsense!” hissed Jupiter. “That’s just me! Come on—we have to find the door handle as quickly as possible!”

Hectically, the boys got up again and began to scan the wall. Finally Pete found the handle, pulled the door open, and the three of them rushed out.

Outside, Pete was just about to start another sprint, when he noticed in amazement that Jupiter was leaning against the shed door, which had fallen shut again in the meantime, to take a breath.

“Are you crazy to just stand still? We have to get out of here now, otherwise the monster fox will catch us!”

Bob was also visibly irritated.

“Don’t worry,” Jupe replied, panting. “The beast is guaranteed not to come after us. If you prick up your ears, you’ll notice that not the slightest noise can be heard from inside.”

“That’s right,” Pete admitted in amazement.

Bob frowned. “And how did you know that?”

“Quite simple. Unlike you, who were spellbound by the admittedly extremely creepy grimace, I also looked a little deeper. And in doing so, I noticed that the giant fox has no legs.”

“What?” Pete gasped.

Jupiter straightened up again. “The fact that you paid attention exclusively to the eerie upper body of the ‘fox’ was unquestionably the purpose of this spectacular creepy effect.”

“Effect?” asked Pete, puzzled.

“Well, it certainly wasn’t a horror figure from Greek mythology that came to life,” Jupiter replied with a reproving undertone.

Pete looked at him sceptically. “If you are so sure, why did you run away from the monster just like we did?”

“I have to correct you on that one,” Jupiter interjected. “I didn’t flee from the fox, but from the cloud of vapour. In my opinion, it was a fast-acting anaesthetic gas.”

Puzzled, Bob rubbed his ear. “What makes you think of that?”

Jupiter gestured to the shed door. “Let’s just wait a few minutes, then we’ll see if my theory is correct.”

“You want to go back in there?” asked Pete incredulously, “and what if you’re wrong?”

The First Investigator grinned broadly. “Then we should definitely take a nice photo of the creature. A picture proving the existence of the Teumessian fox in the flesh should be worth quite a bit...”



## 7. Garvine's Secret Poison Factory

After five minutes had passed and the boys had made sure that was no one in the vicinity, Pete opened the shed door carefully.

The lights had gone out, but the incoming sunlight was enough to determine that the giant fox had indeed not followed them. There was not the slightest trace of the creature, instead, there was now a sweetish smell in the musty air, but it was fading more and more.

With a determined expression, Jupiter stepped into the shed, switched the light back on and made a presenting gesture. "As you see—the fox has disappeared and the secret door is firmly closed. If the shelving unit is back in position, there would be nothing to indicate that we had discovered the lab."

"And what's all this about?" asked Bob, confused.

Jupe pointed forward. "Come on, let's have a look."

Hesitantly, Pete and Bob followed the First Investigator to the back of the shed, where Jupiter reached purposefully for the green push-button telephone.

"I will now operate the remote control again and open the secret entrance. But this time..." he looked sternly at Pete, "... no one will please venture into the lab without thinking, but we will all stand nicely outside the door."

"Got it," grumbled the Second Investigator.

Despite the explanations, he was not comfortable. If Jupiter was wrong, the giant fox could have remained on the other side all this time and would pounce on them as soon as the door opened. But he had no time for further thoughts, because at that moment, Jupiter pressed the remote control.

With a low hum, the secret door swung aside and the bright white lights in the lab flared up again. Cautiously, the boys approached the entrance.

"That's what I thought," Jupiter explained, pointing to the floor. "Down there you can see the square outline of a plate that sets off a complex defence mechanism when touched."

"You mean when I stepped on that slab I triggered the monster's emergence?" asked Pete.

"That's exactly what I mean." Jupe pointed forward. "If you look closely, you can see the hairy torso of our Teumessian friend in the reflection on the metal cabinet over there. That up there is obviously the mechanism on which he swings back and forth."

"Indeed..." Bob murmured, puzzled. "But why this huge effort?"

"If I'm not mistaken, the plan was as follows—in case anyone found out about his dark secret, Garvine wanted to make sure that the person concerned would no longer be able to do anything with his knowledge. Because as soon as the intruder enters—"

"... He triggers the hidden contact and the giant fox emerges," Pete added. "Like we did just now."

The First Investigator nodded. "Exactly. At the same moment, the mechanical fox emits a powerful stun gas, whereupon the intruder loses consciousness."

"And then?" asked Pete. "At some point he or she would wake up again."

"I strongly assume that an alarm signal is also coupled to this mechanism, which immediately notifies Mr Garvine of an unauthorized intrusion. Of course, since he is now in

police custody, he can't respond to it."

"I see," Bob replied. "So his real plan was to come here immediately after an alarm, where he would find the unconscious intruder."

"Right. I suspect that Garvine would then have additionally administered some of his secret frog poisons to the unconscious person so that he would hardly remember anything after waking up."

With a grim expression, Jupiter thought of his dramatic experience in the toilet. "The hideous grimace of the monster fox would then probably have overridden all other memories."

"So for the whole thing to work, the person had to be taken out of here inconspicuously before waking up," Pete concluded.

"Of course. Garvine may simply have used the big wheelbarrow there for that. In any case, the plastic tarpaulin would make the best camouflage."

The First Investigator's gaze fell on some empty beer bottles standing in a yellow plastic bucket behind the lawnmower tractor. "To make the deception perfect, the victim would perhaps get another beer bottle pressed into his hand after Garvine had secretly dropped him off somewhere on the university grounds."

Bob puffed grimly. "Upon awakening, the subject would have remembered only a terrible fox nightmare, which he would inevitably have attributed to a blackout."

"And because the whole thing would be quite embarrassing, he or she would certainly keep it all to themselves and not bother anyone with it," Jupiter added.

"A really devious plan," Bob hissed angrily and let his gaze wander over the metal tables again.

"We can now clear up the fox mystery," Pete said, "with Garvine's secret poison factory."

"Oh gosh! Now you even talk in rhyme," Jupe quipped. "I hope you don't do it all the time."

Bob laughed at the exchange of poems between his friends.

"But you're right," Jupe continued on a serious note. "This should be enough evidence to finally put an end to Garvine's criminal machinations. We have experienced the consequences both with some students and in our own bodies. Further police investigations will have to show what the objective was behind it."

Bob leaned forward a little. "And now what? Shall we have a look around inside? We now know where the floor panel with the alarm mechanism is."

"I would rather refrain from that," replied the First Investigator. "It cannot be ruled out that there are other traps in the lab. Besides, it's better if everything here remains unchanged until the police take over the investigation."

As Jupiter turned to go back to the table with the push-button telephone, Bob took a last look into the secret lab. Suddenly, he noticed a black cardboard folder on the shelf in the lab next to the door. Several documents were sticking out of it.

With eyes widening in surprise, Bob noticed that one of the papers bore a heading whose initial letters looked extremely familiar to him: 'QUAE'. It had to be a photocopy of an issue of the university newsletter *Quaesito*! But why would Garvine store something like that in his secret lab? Did it have anything to do with Bob's father, who had also been on the fox's trail many years ago?

Without thinking about it for long, Bob grabbed the small folder and stuffed it under his T-shirt in the waistband of his trousers. Turning around, he was relieved to see that his friends had not noticed anything.

After the laboratory entrance was closed again and the Second Investigator had locked the door of the equipment shed, the three boys discussed their next steps.

"We still have half an hour until our next classes start," Jupiter noted. "Enough time, then, to go to the campus police and report our spectacular find."

Pete looked at him in astonishment. "So you want to skip lunch and come with us?"

"Sometimes an investigator has to make sacrifices," Jupiter replied with a sigh. "If necessary, getting to a snack machine will do this time. In any case, notifying the police is a priority. Also, I want to go on record as saying that some of Garvine's experiments are obviously still having an effect. In my psychology class earlier, a student was behaving very strangely—"

Before the First Investigator could continue speaking, a beep from his mobile phone indicated that he had received a text message. Astonished, he read the message on the display aloud: 'Mr Jones, please come to the Medical Centre, Office 2. It's urgent.'

Pete raised his eyebrows in irritation. "Well, do they want to quarantine you? Maybe Garvine's stuff was contagious somehow."

"Don't be so negative," grumbled the First Investigator. "If it was something serious, I would hardly be summoned to an office. Anyway, I'd better go there. You two proceed to the police station..."

At the police station, Pete and Bob were directed to Officer Hogart without delay. With obvious astonishment, the officer listened to the investigators' report about the equipment shed, the telephone remote control and the caretaker's secret laboratory, and busily took notes. Afterwards, he skimmed his notes again and smiled appreciatively.

"This is really very interesting news... and it fits right in. While Mr Garvine consistently refuses to testify, several complaints have already been received since this morning from students making serious allegations against him."

"As long as Garvine was still at large, the people concerned probably did not dare to testify against him," Pete speculated.

"That is to be assumed," Hogart said. "It appears that Garvine has been conducting forbidden experiments on unknowing students for many years to test the efficacy of various substances he developed himself."

"Do you already know what exactly was behind it?" asked Bob.

The officer nodded. "During a house search, we discovered documents in a secret compartment from which we conclude that they were experiments for new types of designer drugs. Garvine apparently exploited unsuspecting students to analyze the physical reactions and possible side effects of his substances. He didn't sell the drugs here, however, but in the higher circles of Hollywood, where over time, he established himself as a major player."

Pete shook his head, aghast. "So the real drug lord of Ruxton was not Egglesforth III, but Lemuel Garvine..."

"Unbelievable," Bob muttered. "So here in Ruxton, this unscrupulous guy tested the effects of his new kind of drugs and then later monetized the finished product among the pleasure-seeking rich and famous in Hollywood."

"Based on what we know now, that was the process, yes," Mr Hogart confirmed. "We are already in contact with our colleagues at the Los Angeles Police Department, to whom Garvine will be transferred shortly. Their narcotics unit has been on the trail of a mysterious dealer known as the 'Amphibian Phantom' for years. Over the years, various raids have

resulted in the seizure of unknown narcotics containing chemically modified substances from the skin gland secretions of frogs and toads.”

“Just disgusting,” Pete muttered as he thought of all the terrariums in Garvine’s house and lab.

“His experiments were apparently based on what has long been known about the intoxicating effects of the secretion of South American cane toads,” the officer continued. “Dried and inhaled, this glandular secretion produces perceptual changes and hallucinations, which is why it is widely abused as a ‘bio drug’. Some people even lick the poisonous cane toads directly to put themselves in an immediate state of intoxication.”

Pete contorted his face in disgust. “I think I’m going to be sick...”

## 8. An Inconceivable Accusation

When Jupiter entered the bright and invitingly furnished office on the first floor of the Medical Centre after knocking for a moment, he was surprised to find that it was not a doctor in a white coat sitting behind the modern tubular steel desk, but the psychologist Maria Elena Fernandez. She smiled at him in a friendly manner, but the First Investigator thought he also detected a hint of worry in her expression.

“Hello, Jupiter,” she greeted him and pointed to an office chair. “Please, sit down.”

“Mrs Fernandez...” Jupiter replied hesitantly and took a seat. “I admit that I didn’t expect to see you again so soon. I was supposed to meet you at your office this afternoon.”

“That is true. But a certain... uh... incident has made it necessary for me to speak to you now.”

“Oh yeah?” Jupiter raised his eyebrows in surprise. He had to think of Pete’s joking reference about a quarantine. “What’s it about?”

“About this.” Mrs Fernandez pointed to a white envelope labelled ‘LABORATORY’, which Jupiter was only now consciously aware of.

“The result of my blood test?” he asked.

Clearly visible worry lines now appeared on the psychologist’s forehead. “Yes.”

Gradually, the First Investigator began to worry. What was going on? “Is there something wrong? Am I... sick or something?”

“Physically, no,” Mrs Fernandez replied seriously, “but your mental state worries me.”

“My... mental state?” Dumbfounded, Jupe leaned forward. He felt like he was in the wrong movie altogether.

The psychologist now leaned forward and looked deep into the eyes of the First Investigator. “Jupiter, I want to be completely open with you and ask you to show me the same trust. Having had the opportunity to get to know you a little, I see you as a very determined and success-oriented young man who knows exactly what he wants and will not let go until he has achieved the desired result. You would agree with me on that, wouldn’t you?”

“Uh...” It was highly rare that the First Investigator was at a loss for words, but at that moment, he did not know how to react. Was this some kind of psychological test? And if so, what purpose did it serve?

As Mrs Fernandez was still looking at him expectantly, he finally struggled to answer. “That’s... pretty much it, yes.”

The psychologist nodded in understanding. “And your hunt for Mr Garvine strongly challenged this trait in you. You wanted to hunt the man down at all costs and therefore put yourself under extreme pressure to succeed. You had to compensate for the stress that built up somehow, right?”

“Compensate?” The situation was getting more and more bizarre. And what did all this have to do with his blood sample? Jupiter was beginning to get tired of this game of hide-and-seek, the rules of which only Mrs Fernandez seemed to know. “Would you please tell me what you are getting at?”

"I could certainly do that," the psychologist replied in a soft voice. "But I'd rather you open up on your own free will." She smiled at him encouragingly. "Trust me—you can tell me, Jupiter."

The First Investigator's mind was spinning wildly. The whole conversation was so absurd that the only thing missing to crown it all was the moment when someone would jump out of one of the office cupboards shouting: "You're on *Candid Camera*!". But the moment did not come.

Jupiter took a deep breath and tried to answer in as calm and firm a voice as possible. "Mrs Fernandez, I hereby tell you frankly and in full confidence that I haven't the faintest idea what you are talking about."

A short pause of tense silence set in. Then the psychologist sighed and leaned back in her office chair. The smile had disappeared from her face.

"I'm talking about *dimethyltryptamine*—a hallucinogenic alkaloid that was detected in your blood." Mrs Fernandez's expression had lost all warmth. Now her gaze radiated only disappointment and cold severity. "You have taken drugs, Jupiter Jones..."

The officer pointed to a folder with several documents opened in front of him. "Of course, Garvine could not afford dramatic or even fatal side effects if his designer drug was to be a success. Therefore, based on the secretion of the cane toad, he experimented with a special chemical separation method. He isolated the intoxicating component, the so-called bufotenine, from all undesirable components and coupled the toxin to other substances. It was this special formulation that made the drug so popular among his clientèle."

"For example?" Pete wanted to know.

"According to information from our colleagues in Los Angeles, the so-called 'frog jumps' were characterized by two main effects—firstly, very intense optical and acoustic changes in perception, such as those produced by the notorious drug LSD; and secondly, a comprehensive release of feelings of anxiety and stress, which leads to strong euphoria."

"Perceptual changes, hallucinations and fearlessness," Bob summed up thoughtfully. "That explains several strange occurrences we've observed here in Ruxton over the past few days."

Hogart nodded. "That fits with our theory of the secret experiments. Garvine kept developing variations of the drug, so his clientèle. was always eagerly awaiting the next generation of 'frog jumps'. A contact in LA apparently acted as a kind of intermediary for his luxury clientèle. in the process."

"Then it was probably that contact who had called on the strange super mobile phone," Bob murmured in Pete's direction. "There must have been sensitive data stored in it—that's probably why Garvine had planted a destruction mechanism in case the device fell into the wrong hands."

"A really cunning fox," Pete replied. "He had a plan for everything. And before he silver-plated his latest frog mess in Hollywood, he tried it out on unsuspecting students here on campus..."

"He probably perfected this devious strategy more and more over time," the officer explained. "In the process, the criminally infiltrated connection to Alpha Lambda Chi was apparently also part of his scheme."

"In what way?" asked Bob in surprise.

"The documents show that Garvine had long known about the crimes of John Walker alias Bernhard Egglesforth III, but had deliberately left him alone. If the university

administration had become aware of the strange behaviour of some students, Garvine would have specifically directed suspicion to the drug activities surrounding Alpha Lambda Chi.”

“Professor Roalstad must also have known or at least suspected that this fraternity had a dark side, with which Garvine was somehow connected,” Bob murmured frowning. “That’s why he mentioned this connection...”

“But what did Garvine do if one of his victims noticed something himself?” Pete asked.

“On the rare occasions when a student became aware of his machinations, Garvine intimidated him massively with threats or blackmail,” Officer Hogart explained. “We know this from those who now finally dare to press charges.”

“And he used his special pets as persuasive arguments,” Bob added angrily. “A truly unscrupulous monster...”

A slap in the face could hardly have hit Jupiter harder. Mrs Fernandez’s sentence seemed to reverberate in the room like a thunderclap, while the stunned First Investigator’s gaze bounced back and forth between the psychologist and the laboratory envelope. This accusation was so grotesque that Jupiter’s logical reasoning suspended for a brief moment. He was stunned. He, of all people, who would never, ever think of clouding his precious mind with any means, was seriously accused of taking drugs!

“You can be glad that Dr Wilcomb was informed about my conversation with you yesterday,” Mrs Fernandez continued in a serious tone. “That’s why he first notified me as the psychologist before reporting the drug findings to the faculty, otherwise, official action would have been taken by now. Nevertheless, you will probably be expelled from the university. With such a serious breach of Ruxton’s statutes, even my hands are tied.” In a gesture that seemed at once reproachful and perplexed, she raised her shoulders. “Why didn’t you tell me about your problems?”

Only now did an invisible hand in the First Investigator’s head seem to have found the switch to reactivate logic again. Suddenly everything was clear to him. This strange alkaloid with the unpronounceable name had to belong to some frog poison substance that Mr Garvine had administered to him unnoticed yesterday!

Annoyed with himself, Jupiter pressed his lips together. In retrospect, it was downright ridiculous how he had allowed himself to be so blindsided by the situation. His famous perspicacity must still be clouded by the after-effects of the hallucination. Otherwise, he would undoubtedly have grasped what this was all about from the very beginning of the conversation. After all, Jupe had fervently hoped that the blood test would reveal something conspicuous that could be used to draw conclusions about his mysterious freak-out in the cafeteria toilet. Unfortunately, it had not occurred to him that the results would give a completely different impression to outsiders. Dr Wilcomb and Mrs Fernandez could not have known that Jupiter had not taken the drug voluntarily.

“Even... if that sounds like the clumsiest excuse in the world,” Jupiter put in hesitantly, “it’s really not what it looks like.”

“Oh, no?” the psychologist asked with a raised left eyebrow. “What’s it like then?”

Jupiter straightened up and tried to sort out his troubled thoughts. “As you have probably already heard, Mr Garvine was arrested last night. Our suspicions, which were apparently shared by Professor Roalstad, have been confirmed across the board—the real Teumessian fox of Ruxton was Lemuel Garvine. He alone was behind all the strange happenings here.”

“That may be so,” Mrs Fernandez replied sternly, “but the ends do not justify the means. The fact that you have hunted down a devious criminal is unquestionably remarkable and

worthy of all honour. But this success is no justification for taking forbidden substances with which you wanted to combat your nervous stress.”

“But it wasn’t like that at all,” Jupiter objected energetically. “I didn’t take anything at all, but I can now gather that Mr Garvine secretly gave me some frog toxin, whereupon I had the nervous breakdown! I suppose the whole thing was meant to be a final warning for us to stop our investigations.”

Mrs Fernandez uttered a contemptuous sound. “So you’re seriously suggesting that Mr Garvine has secretly fed you a ‘frog hallucinogen’ of his own making so you won’t spy on him anymore? Do you actually know what that sounds like?”

Demonstratively, the psychologist clasped the receiver of her phone with her right hand. “Too bad. Since you obviously don’t want to cooperate, I guess we should end this conversation...”



## 9. The Lord of Lies

The officer nodded. “Garvine has probably used his snakes in particular as an effective means of intimidation.”

“You could say that,” Bob replied with a frown. While he was still thinking about the night incident with the tiger snake and Ivy’s account of her abduction, a completely different question suddenly occurred to him—had it been similar with his father Bill Andrews? Had the caretaker then become aware of Bob’s dad’s enquiries? Had Garvine then forced him with threats to stop his research and eventually even to leave Ruxton University? If so—with what means of pressure had Bill Andrews been threatened or blackmailed?

Bob had always known his father as a courageous and fearless journalist who would not let himself be dissuaded from an important story for anything in the world. Attempts to intimidate him with snakes or poisonous frogs would certainly not have put him off. So Garvine must have had something else on Bob’s father—something so important or so bad that he had been able to blackmail him with it. The knowledge of a dark secret?

Involuntarily, Bob stroked his T-shirt, under which Garvine’s document folder was located. He felt an overwhelming urge to take it out immediately and leaf through it. But if there really was some terrible information about his father in it, Bob certainly didn’t want it to come to light in front of the campus policeman... and not in front of Pete either...

His friend’s words brought him back to the here and now: “There is one thing I would like to know. What did these drugs actually look like? Garvine had to be able to slip them to the test students very inconspicuously.”

“He made it both in tablet and in liquid form in small ampoules,” the officer explained. “With a little skill, the liquid version certainly made it easy to administer the substance to an unknowing person.”

“It certainly worked for our friend,” Bob noted. At this thought, something suddenly occurred to him. “Oh yes—before we forget, Jupiter is sure that he observed after-effects of the drug on a student this morning.”

Hogart rubbed his chin thoughtfully. “That would indicate a very long duration of action or a recurring symptom. We can probably rule out the possibility that we are dealing with an active user, because as things stand, Garvine has never dealt at the university. One reason is that he does not have wealthy clients here, and another is because he consistently wanted to maintain his cover as a harmless caretaker.”

“It’s worked out fine so far,” Pete summed up grimly. “But now Garvine’s time as Ruxton’s secret drug fox is over.”

“And you have your share in that, boys,” the officer replied with a smile. “At the latest after we have thoroughly investigated the lab you discovered, we will be able to close the last gaps in our knowledge about Garvine’s ‘frog jumps’. In addition, we will put out a bulletin on campus so that any student who has had any strange perceptual experiences in the past can discreetly come forward and be investigated. Your friend should do the same, by the way.”

“That won’t be necessary,” Pete replied. “He’s already had his examination and is probably being presented with the results right now.” In his mind, he added: “Hopefully not a bad one...”

Nervously, Jupiter pushed aside a cup that must have come from a previous visitor and wiped his forehead. He felt as battered and exhausted as a boxer in the twelfth round.

"Mrs Fernandez, since you don't yet know the background to Mr Garvine's arrest, your suspicion is only too understandable. But I beg you—if I were lying, I would hardly have come up with such an absurd story, but something halfway plausible, wouldn't I?" He shook his head in dismay. "I realize that explanation sounds richly preposterous, but that's exactly how it must have played out. Look at me—do you really think I'm fooling you here?"

Mrs Fernandez hesitated, but her hand still rested on the phone. "And why didn't you mention any of this yesterday?"

"Because everything was still up in the air and Garvine was still at large. Besides, I was pretty out of it after the incident in the toilet."

It was abundantly clear to the psychologist that she still had doubts about Jupiter's explanations. "And what do you expect from me now? That I just let everything rest, as if nothing had happened?"

"No, I do not expect that. But I would urge you to refrain from making an official report for the time being, until the results of the police investigation are available. I promise you that everything will be cleared up then."

He looked expectantly at the psychologist, whose hardened features now seemed to relax a little.

"All right," she said after a short pause and withdrew her hand from the phone. "I am not at all convinced yet, but you actually seem to believe in what you say. So until the police report back, I will wait to forward the findings."

Jupe breathed a sigh of relief. "Thank you very much for the leap of faith. I'm sure you won't regret it." A smile flitted across his face. "I can assure you—as a means of coping with stress, the most I ever resort to is my Aunt Mathilda's cherry pie."

Mrs Fernandez also had to smile now. "I would definitely classify such a 'calorie drug' as harmless..."

After Pete and Bob had left the campus police station, there was just enough time before the start of their classes to get two sandwiches from one of the many vending machines.

After that, the Second Investigator said goodbye and hurried to the Faculty of Humanities, where a lecture on the 'Poetry of the European Middle Ages' awaited him in Lecture Hall 5.

Bob, however, could no longer stand the tension because of Garvine's document folder. He would rather be a few minutes late for his class than remain in the dark any longer.

To be undisturbed, he sought out the nearest toilet and retreated into one of the cubicles. He carefully locked the door, listened briefly to see if he was alone, and then took out the folder. His nerves were stretched to breaking point as he hesitantly leafed through the papers.

The first slips of paper were indeed photocopies of a long article from an old issue of *Quaesitio*, accurately date-stamped. Bob's pulse seemed to stop momentarily when he realized that under the last column was the abbreviation 'BA'. So the article had actually been written by his father! According to the date, it was from the year Bill Andrews had suddenly left Ruxton and transferred to UCLA.

Bob skimmed the text with a flickering gaze. His eyes widened as he realized he was completely unfamiliar with it. He had never seen this article before, although he had in possession of copies of the missing *Quaesitio* editions from Eugene Emery. How was that

possible? Should he have overlooked an edition despite his diligence? Bob paused. He had just discovered a small stamp on the bottom margin of the last page—the words ‘PRESS RELEASE’ was barely visible. Someone had crossed it out with a thick felt-tip pen.

Bob frowned irritably. Obviously, the article that had already been set had been exchanged for another one at the last moment. But for what reason had this happened—and why had Bill Andrews allowed it?

Again Bob let his eyes wander over the lines. What was so explosive about this text that someone had taken it out of the newsletter shortly before it was printed?

The front page topic was ‘Fatal Deficits in Talent Development’. Mr Andrews pointed out in the article, with the help of various examples, that the university was apparently criminally neglecting to adequately promote exceptional performers in a wide variety of disciplines. Over the years, highly talented students had repeatedly dropped out of their laboratory courses in the middle of promising developmental stages and had later switched to fields that no longer had anything to do with their original objectives. Instead of celebrating great successes in their former fields, these students usually completed a completely unspectacular course of study with a mediocre degree and later no longer made any meaningful progress.

‘Stinginess Obstructs Ingenuity’ was one of the striking subheadings. Another provocatively asked: ‘Blind to Brilliance?’ Clearly, Mr Andrews saw the root of the problem in miscalculated budget cuts and plain ignorance of exceptional talent who, for lack of support, simply ‘rotted away in academic no-man’s land’. Bob’s father denounced this waste of ‘intellectual resources’ with fiery words and called for a quick rethink.

His article, however, seemed never to have reached the public, as it had not been printed at all. Bob bit his lower lip tensely. Who would have had so much power to prevent the publication of this text? The editors of *Quaesito*? Or the university management? But even if it had been—why had Lemuel Garvine been interested in this criticism? The whole thing made no sense...

## 10. Shocking Revelation

Mrs Fernandez raised her finger in warning. “However, I would like to make one thing clear right now—if there is no clear exculpatory evidence of your innocence, I will be forced to report the matter.”

“Of course,” Jupe replied, “but I am supremely confident that no doubts will remain about my righteousness. Until then, I will be happy to keep you informed. I shall probably be able to tell you something new before long. My two friends are with the campus police right now because of the Garvine case.”

The psychologist nodded. “Okay. However, I would like to postpone our afternoon appointment. We have now had an intensive exchange and I would like to keep my office hours free for some students who have made appointments at short notice this morning. They were obviously victims of Mr Garvine, who would now like to talk about what they have experienced.”

“No problem,” Jupiter replied. “If there’s any important news, I can just call and let you know.”

“Good idea, then we’ll stay like that.” She looked over at a stylish wall clock. “If you have a class now, you should hurry up.”

The First Investigator smiled in relief. “I’ll do that!”

With a feeling of deep relief, Jupiter left the office and walked down the long corridor to the stairwell. On the ground floor, he was met by a bald man of about sixty wearing a white coat with ‘Ernest Wilcomb, M.D.’ embroidered across the pocket. With a polite smile, the First Investigator approached him.

“Good afternoon, Dr Wilcomb! I’m Jupiter Jones—you treated me yesterday, but I was too out of it due to the anaesthetic to thank you. I would like to do that now.”

“Oh, that’s nice.” The doctor returned the smile and glanced at Jupiter’s bandage. “How is your hand today?”

“Very well, thanks to your great care and medication,” Jupe replied. “It’s actually just a little pinch now.”

Dr Wilcomb nodded with satisfaction. “If you still get discomfort, just get in touch with me. Tomorrow we should change the bandage in any case.”

“All right, see you tomorrow then!” Jupiter had already turned away when he paused and turned around again. “Oh yes—thank you, by the way, for letting Mrs Fernandez know about the results of my blood test. It will all be cleared up shortly.”

“Huh? I don’t quite understand.” Dr Wilcomb raised his eyebrows. “The analysis of your blood sample was inconclusive. Why should I tell anyone about that?”

Jupiter literally felt his features freeze. He would have expected anything, but not this answer. “Then... you haven’t found anything... uh... unusual?”

The doctor shook his head. “There were no abnormalities, all the indicators were normal. Why do you ask? Did you expect something else?”

No abnormalities, echoed the First Investigator’s thoughts. That was completely impossible... For a brief moment, he felt the temptation to tell Dr Wilcomb about the conversation that had just taken place, but then he decided against it. Just two minutes ago,

the situation had been clear and manageable, but now, completely without warning, everything was suddenly getting out of hand. That's why he couldn't take any risks.

"No, not that. Sorry, there must have been a misunderstanding. I guess I'm still a little confused about yesterday. So you... didn't talk to Mrs Fernandez about me today?"

"Neither about you nor about anything else," the doctor replied. "I haven't even met her today."

A clear and unmistakable answer, and at the same time, the final confirmation for Jupe that his friends and he had been mistaken. The secrets of Ruxton were not at all fully unravelled...

Lost in thought, he said goodbye to Dr Wilcomb and left the Medical Centre. Bright sunshine greeted him and cheerful bird chirping wafted over to him from the park. The First Investigator, however, took no notice. He had even forgotten about his hunger.

Brooding, he walked towards his faculty building where a rather unwieldy-sounding lecture on the subject of 'B.F. Skinner and the Foundations of Behaviourism' awaited him on the fourth floor. However, Jupiter strongly doubted that he would be an attentive listener this time.

Confused, Bob turned the page and stopped again. Stunned, he looked at a meticulously compiled dossier on his father that had obviously been prepared by Lemuel Garvine. Every little detail was listed—from Bill Andrews's favourite subjects in school to his romantic feelings towards his later wife. There was no doubt about it—Garvine must have studied Bob's father's life intensively, down to the most private details. Above all, however, the caretaker had been interested in Bill's major subjects in his journalism studies at Ruxton. He had meticulously listed all the courses, lecturers and projects Bill had ever been involved with. But why?

With a queasy feeling in his stomach, Bob opened the next page of the folder—and let out a horrified gasp. If he hadn't already been sitting, his legs would have buckled now. With wide eyes, he stared at a photo which almost took his breath away.

In an old-fashioned, wood-panelled hall, three people could be seen, two of whom were dressed in fiery red, floor-length robes. The robed individual on the extreme left, who was apparently bowing reverently, had pulled the large hood of the robe so far forward that the face was shrouded in a deep shadow.

In the background, in front of a mighty mirror, a kind of altar could be seen. On its candle-adorned top was a grotesque, obviously wood-carved sculpture that rose up into the air. It was a fox standing upright with its front legs raised threateningly and its mouth open greedily.

No doubt about it—what Bob saw there was a secret society that paid homage to the Teumessian fox! And it didn't seem to have anything to do with the superficial activities of Alpha Lambda Chi, because there were no identifying signs of this fraternity anywhere to be seen. Moreover, it was probably only a small circle, because apart from the group, there was no one else in the room.

Much more disturbing than this eerie gathering or the idol of the fox, however, was the fact that Bob recognized the two men in the middle of the photo. One of them was also dressed in a red robe, but instead of a hood he wore a shapelessly large headdress that reminded Bob of a bishop's mitre. On the headdress were hung what looked like animal teeth and claws, and this gave the man's appearance a disturbingly wild and violent persona. This

impression was reinforced by the broad grin, more reminiscent of a snarl, with which the man looked into the camera.

Although many years had passed since this photo was taken and the repulsive headdress severely distorted him, the striking facial features clearly revealed that it was none other than Lemuel Garvine! So The Three Investigators, and the police too, had been mistaken. The Teumessian fox of Ruxton had not been a loner, but had a following with whom he held bizarre rituals in secret.

What made Bob's blood run cold, however, was not Garvine himself, but the confident gesture with which he shook the other man's hand and put an arm around his shoulders. However much Bob wished he could deny the inconceivable and blink hard to expose the shocking truth as an optical illusion, he could not.

The brown-haired second man who returned Garvine's handshake and looked steadfastly at the photographer was... his father!

## 11. On the Trail of the Secret

Bob no longer knew how long he had just sat there, staring motionlessly into nothingness. It could have been seconds, but also several hours, so much had his thoughts been torn away from the here and now.

He still could not grasp what he had just discovered. The dark premonitions that had haunted him like looming shadows ever since his dad's first strange behaviour in the past few days had come horrifically true. Bill Andrews, his always upright and honourable father, had been a follower of Lemuel Garvine—an accomplice of the Teumessian fox!

Bob felt as if the ground had been pulled out from under his feet and he was now falling into a deep black hole. As if in a daze, he kept wiping his hand over the photo, as if he could erase his father's face in this way and make it disappear forever. In front of his inner eye, the startling realization flashed up as if in glaring illuminated letters: 'My father—a liar and a cheat!' Perhaps even worse...

With an almost surreal certainty, Bob realized that this was by far the worst moment of his life. And what a bitter irony of fate it was that this terrible moment had occurred in such a cheap and shameful way—here, far from family and friends, in the cubicle of a toilet, the portfolio of a criminal caretaker had destroyed Bob's trust in his father.

How was he ever going to be able to look his dad in the eye again? And what was he supposed to tell his mother, who had no idea of her husband's sinister secret?

Bob's veiled gaze slid along the cubicle wall and caught abruptly on a quote written in red felt-tip pen: 'It is more difficult to shatter a preconceived opinion than an atom—Albert Einstein'.

For a few seconds Bob paused, letting the words seep into his mind. Then, very gradually, a new sensation pierced the dark veil of his despair, like a delicate spark glowing amidst a gloomy grey mist—doubt.

Had he possibly rushed to a damning judgement because of the overwhelming impact of the photo? Had this supposedly unambiguous picture of evidence merely confirmed a subconsciously preconceived opinion that had developed from the growing fears of the past few days?

Bob closed his eyes and took several deep breaths. Then he looked at the photo again. His features had hardened in grim determination and his lower lip quivered as he hissed loudly: "That's not what happened! And I'll prove it!"

He closed the folder, tucked it back under his T-shirt and left the toilet. There was no more room in his mind for the journalism class. There were far more important things to do. Since his only concrete starting point was his father's *Quaesitio* article, he would now go to the library and read through the entire text again, letter by letter. Only if he deciphered the mystery it contained would he have a chance of finding out what had really happened back then. And then, hopefully, an explanation for the terrible photo would be found...

When the somewhat monotonous lecture on European Middle Age poetry ended almost two hours later, the Second Investigator let out a soft yawn. Hesitantly, he looked over at Samantha Shirona. Because of the previous rejection, she had demonstratively chosen a seat

as far away from him as possible. He seemed to have finally lost it with her, but that was fine with him. He could do without her annoying advances.

Pete's new fan club, however, was still highly active—and very attractive as he had to admit. No sooner had he walked through the door than six female students surrounded him in the corridor, their eyes shining, wanting to ask him about his 'source of lyrical inspiration'. He already had the annoyed answer on the tip of his tongue that he had always fancied the sayings of Bugs Bunny, when he saw the energetically waving First Investigator coming towards him. Saying that he had to go to an urgent meeting, Pete made his way to Jupiter, who looked at him excitedly.

"Do you know where Bob is? I just went to Lecture Hall 7 where his journalism class was, but he's not there."

Pete shrugged his shoulders. "I don't know, I've only just come out. But why are you so excited?"

"I'll tell you about that as soon as we find Bob..."

In the past one and a half hours, Bob had achieved some amazing research successes, partly with the active support of an extremely helpful administrative employee. In the meantime, it was certain beyond doubt that his father's critical article had indeed been exchanged for another one. In the *Quaesitio* issue of the same date as the one in Garvine's folder, there was an article signed 'BA' which was exactly the same in scope as the original article on talent wastage.

However, the new text had nothing in common with its predecessor in terms of both subject matter and argumentative intensity and determination. It was a rather lovelessly written article about the sporting successes of the Ruxton Rangers, obviously written under great time pressure. The university's football team had made it to the coveted Bowl Championship Series that year and was on the verge of one of the greatest triumphs in its history. From a sporting point of view, of course, an appropriate tribute was entirely appropriate, but in terms of content, it did not even have the same journalistic quality as the old article. It seemed as if Bill Andrews had been forced to write this lavish praise of the Rangers within a very short time, instead of publishing his original indictment of the funding abuses.

By now, Bob also thought he knew the real reason why someone had prevented the article from appearing. But before he pursued this trail further, he first wanted to call Mr Emery and find out whether he had known anything about the exchange of the article at that time.

In order to be undisturbed, he decided against using one of the telephone booths in the crowded foyer of the library. Instead, he went outside, took out his mobile phone and dialled the number of the movie critic.

It was not Mr Emery who answered, however, but his lodger. Briefly, he told Bob that Eugene was not available because he had unexpectedly had to stand in for a fellow critic and had left for a movie festival in San Francisco. He would probably not be back for another two weeks and had expressly forbidden giving anyone his mobile phone number.

Without Bob being able to probe further, the lodger had already hung up. Frowning, Bob lowered the mobile phone. This sudden departure of Mr Emery seemed strange to him. While it made sense for a movie critic to travel to a movie festival, there was a crucial catch—the famous San Francisco International Movie Festival was traditionally always held in spring



and not in summer. And Bob was pretty sure that no other movie event was currently being held in and around San Francisco either. The whole thing was highly peculiar...

Just as he was about to return to the library, his mobile phone rang. The familiar voice on the other end made him pause in surprise.

"Hello, Bob, it's Llew Roalstad."

Bob opened his eyes in surprise. "Mr Roalstad! What a surprise! We were very worried about you because your wife told me you were still very unwell."

"That's what I thought," the professor hissed in a pressed tone. He obviously had to speak softly. "I'm not at all very bad, on the contrary, my condition is improving from day to day. It's just that the medication is getting to me, so I sleep most of the time."

Confused, Bob faltered. "But why did your wife give me—"

"Virginia hasn't been the same since the accident," Mr Roalstad interrupted him. "She is extremely over-protective and wants to keep everything away from me. I already feel like I'm in solitary confinement..." He spoke more sluggishly now and his voice sounded noticeably duller, as if he was fighting severe fatigue. "If she knew I was... on the phone with you now, she'd probably go nuts, but she's... elsewhere packing for a trip right now..."

"A trip?" Bob asked in surprise.

"Yes, that... was Virginia's idea. She insisted we go to our... cottage in Oregon where I'm supposed to relax away from all the stress. No phone, no fax, no computer..." Mr Roalstad's whisper grew fainter. "We're... leaving shortly, so... I wanted to say goodbye to you first. How... are things in Ruxton?"

"My friends and I were able to put a stop to the Teumessian fox!" replied Bob hastily. He feared that the professor would lose consciousness any second. "It was Mr Garvine, the caretaker!"

At that moment, a loud woman's voice sounded in the distance. She sounded surprised and angry.

"Llew—who are you talking to on the phone? I specifically told you to take it easy!"

"It's... all right," murmured Mr Roalstad, who was now fighting with all his might against falling asleep. "I... just need to quickly—"

"Nothing at all you have to do except rest!"

In the background, Mrs Roalstad could now be heard approaching with hurried steps. She obviously wanted to snatch the phone from her husband.

"Garvine..." the professor breathed. "He... is not—"

"What do you mean?" Bob asked, upset. "Garvine is not the fox?"

"You hang up right now!" shouted Mrs Roalstad in an almost hysterical tone.

In the loud rustling and scratching that now began, Bob could hardly understand anything. But before the connection finally broke, the professor managed to utter one last, hoarse sentence: "Not him, but her—"

## 12. U-Turn

Bob looked at his mobile phone as if he could find an explanation for what had happened in the last few minutes. The conversation with Mr Roalstad had left him so confused that he didn't even notice someone approaching him from behind.

"I knew we'd find our bookworm here!"

Startled, Bob whirled around and looked into the amused faces of Jupiter and Pete.

"Hey! Do you have to sneak up on me like that?" Bob snapped.

"We didn't sneak up on you," Jupiter corrected with a grin. "But in future, I will be happy to announce my arrival from afar with a whistle."

"Too kind," Bob grumbled, looking around in all directions. "But for now, let's go to the dorm. I've got some important news to tell you."

The First Investigator nodded. "Me too..."

Another surprise was waiting for the boys in the kitchenette.

"Taylor-Jackson!" exclaimed Pete as he recognized the lanky boy at the kitchenette table. "You're well again?"

"Sort of," Taylor-Jackson replied with a weak smile as The Three Investigators sat down with him.

"The amount of poison I got was minimal, fortunately." He cast a puzzled glance at Jupiter's bandaged hand. "But what happened to you?"

The First Investigator looked at his friends. "I guess we can all agree that after all he's been through, we can be open with him, right?"

At the nod from Bob and Pete, Juve told the astonished Taylor-Jackson about the events of the past two days and the arrest of Lemuel Garvine. In addition, Bob and Pete told them about the results of the police investigation so far.

"So I have that lousy drug dealer Garvine to thank for the snake bite!" hissed TJ angrily.

"At least that's what we assumed until now," Jupiter replied tensely.

"Until now? Has anything changed?" Pete asked irritated. Bob also blinked in surprise. After all, Jupiter could not yet know about Bob's findings.

"Yes, there is. We can assume with a high degree of probability that at least one more person is involved in the great secret of Ruxton."

Jupiter quickly briefed his friends about his conversation with Mrs Fernandez and her lie about the result of the blood analysis.

Pete raised his eyebrows in disbelief. "But... what does that mean? I thought the case was solved!"

"That's what we all thought until now," replied the First Investigator, "but we were obviously mistaken. There are two conclusions to be drawn from this incident. Firstly, my blood sample contained no traces of Garvine's frog poison, so something else must have led to my loss of consciousness yesterday. Secondly, since Mrs Fernandez tried to convince me of Mr Garvine's guilt in a tactically very clever way, it was presumably to conceal her own culpability."

"You mean it wasn't Mr Garvine but Mrs Fernandez who triggered that strange seizure in you?" asked TJ, puzzled. "But how could it be, if no drugs were involved?"

"Obviously, Mrs Fernandez has abilities that have an amazing effect even without frog venom. As you know, she is an excellent psychologist and I have since learned that she uses hypnosis methods very successfully in her therapies."

Bob furrowed his brow, pondering. "So... she hypnotized you? When was that supposed to have happened? You didn't meet her right before your seizure, did you?"

"Not immediately before, no," Jupiter confirmed. "But I visited her a few hours before that. She must have already started her manipulation there. In retrospect, I remember a moment that is strangely blurred."

"Blurred? What do you mean?" TJ wanted to know.

"I can remember all the details of the conversation very well, but then there's a kind of gap and I'm suddenly standing at the front door saying goodbye to her as if several minutes had been erased from my memory. It's only now that I've really become aware of it."

"If Mrs Fernandez manipulated you when you first met, then she must have had a definite plan even then," Bob surmised.

"Correct. From the very beginning, her goal was to convince me, and thus all of us, that Garvine was the sole perpetrator. Even the attack with the tiger snake was most likely her doing, in order to direct suspicion specifically at the caretaker. The crowning glory was my total failure in the toilet."

"But I still don't understand how she managed to do it without being there," confessed TJ.

"Of course, I can't reconstruct the exact course of events either," Jupiter admitted, "but I suspect that she put me into a brief trance in the afternoon to plant a reaction pattern in me, so to speak. Possibly the somewhat peculiar-tasting iced tea also played a role in this."

Bob tilted his head questioningly. "You're thinking of something that affected your senses so that you wouldn't notice the beginning of the hypnosis?"

"I'm not sure. If so, it was something special that was later undetectable in my blood. In any case, Mrs Fernandez managed to give me some kind of remote trigger that later caused me to have this violent reaction. Perhaps—" Jupiter stopped abruptly.

"What's the matter, Jupe?" Pete enquired uncertainly.

"I... just remembered that my mobile phone rang just after I entered the toilet, but I can't remember who it was or if I even answered it."

"That was Mrs Fernandez for sure!" exclaimed Bob. "In the afternoon, she hypnotized you with a certain stimulus word, and then when you heard that word later on the phone, the reaction was triggered!"

"That would actually be possible," TJ joined in. "I saw a similar experiment on TV once. First, some test subjects under hypnosis were fed a certain cue word and told how to behave when they heard it again. I think these stimulus-inducing words are called triggers."

"Then what happened?" asked Pete tensely.

"After the people were woken up again from hypnosis, everything was normal at first. But when the hypnotist said the particular stimulus word, they did exactly the crazy things he had attached to that word—hopping on one leg singing, running around on all fours meowing, and so on."

"In my case, this trigger was obviously associated with an immediate slide into a surreal dream world," Jupe added. "And by means of the subsequent alleged finding of drugs in my blood, Mrs Fernandez thus arranged a perfectly coordinated scenario that no longer left any doubt about Garvine's guilt."

“But... Mr Garvine is actually a criminal!” objected Pete, confused. “After all, he has been selling his frog drugs in Los Angeles for years, not to mention his forbidden experiments.”

The First Investigator nodded. “That also remains undisputed. Mrs Fernandez has obviously known about these dirty dealings for a long time. When she became nervous as a result of our investigations into the strange occurrences at the university and the myth of the Teumessian fox, she delivered Garvine to the knife as a pawn, so to speak, to end our investigation and get herself out of the line of fire.”

“So Mrs Fernandez must have a dark secret of her own,” concluded the visibly concerned Taylor-Jackson. “There’s no other way to explain such an effort.”

“That’s exactly how it is,” Bob confirmed to everyone’s surprise.

The First Investigator looked at him in amazement. “It sounds as if you already have certainty on that point.”

“At least a strong suspicion,” Bob replied. “I came across it because of a *Quaesito* article by my father that was never published.”

“And where did you find it?” Pete wanted to know.

“That’s not important now,” Bob said. He wanted to keep Garvine’s portfolio and especially the photo secret for the time being, until he really had clarity about his father. “Anyway, I skipped my class to do some research in the library. You see, my dad’s article was about talented students who supposedly abandoned their academic careers because of a lack of support.”

“Supposedly?” asked TJ in amazement. “Then there was really something else behind it?”

Bob’s eyes sparkled. “I guess you could say that...” He pulled a folded computer printout from his pocket. “After some research, it’s been confirmed that over the years, highly gifted students have indeed repeatedly dropped out of their lab courses in the middle of promising experiments and moved on to other, comparatively inconsequential fields.”

Jupiter blinked in irritation. “They simply stopped and never continued their research?”

“At least that’s how it appears. When I looked a little closer at some of these cases, however, I became suspicious. You see, the research objectives of these students were highly revealing.”

“Oh yeah? And why is that?” Pete wanted to know.

Bob pointed to the note. “Because, for example, two students were talking about experiments with so-called ‘flybots’—miniaturized, remote-controlled flying machines in the form of insects or small birds. Equipped with mini cameras and other high-tech equipment, such flying robots could be used for military reconnaissance and espionage purposes.”

Perplexed, Jupiter leaned forward. “That’s the strange flock of birds I saw over Garvine’s house!”

### 13. Secret Projects

“That’s exactly what I had to think about,” Bob confirmed. “I found that out with the kind help of a university staff member. After the said two students dropped out of their lab course four years ago, the experiments were not continued. According to the official reason, it was because of the lack of the required funding. The two students went on to do a mediocre computer science degree, graduated a year ago and then left the university.”

“So even though the experiments stopped four years ago and the two students are no longer at Ruxton, there are flybots like this hovering around the campus,” Pete noted, puzzled.

Bob nodded. “And that is by no means all. Another research project, which was discontinued almost two years ago, dealt with special mobile phones that were to be used in highly sensitive areas such as the diplomatic service. In order to prevent sensitive data from falling into the wrong hands in the event of theft, these devices were to be equipped with a sophisticated automatic self-destruction system.”

“The exploding mobile phone!” shouted Pete. At the questioning look on Taylor-Jackson’s face, the boys told him about the spectacular incident.

“So in this case too, the research continued, even though the experiments were officially stopped some time ago,” TJ concluded.

“That’s right,” Bob agreed. “The focus of another series of tests was on soundproof enclosures in zoos that are in close proximity to residential areas. So insulating materials are developed, in this case, to reduce the volume of animal noises.”

“Then maybe the strange noises we heard were failed sound experiments...” murmured Jupiter with a brooding expression. “So the supposedly ended experiments are still taking place in secret—right here on the university grounds!”

“That’s exactly how it has to be.” Bob energetically crossed his arms. “According to my theory, based on Dad’s research, this is how it plays out—as soon as a certain line of research has reached an advanced stage with the potential to be commercially successful, the students are specifically poached by an insider and the experiments are officially stopped. In order not to arouse suspicion, people continue to stay at the university, switch to completely different courses. In reality, however, they secretly continue to work on their research during and even after their studies and later turn the results into money.”

“But why in secret, when they could also continue their research in a regular way?” asked TJ irritated.

Jupiter frowned. “I suspect that the conditions offered to students by the insider are significantly better than in the official academic business. And for the client, this approach has the inestimable advantage of giving him exclusive access to highly lucrative technical innovations.”

“... With which a huge amount of money can be made,” Pete added grimly.

“Also, this way you bypass the need to comply with onerous regulations and laws,” added Bob. “This also allows you to enter grey and illegal areas that would be excluded in regular university operations.”

"This is all really unbelievable." Dumbfounded, Taylor-Jackson wiped his brow. "So... who is this mysterious insider who is behind all this?"

"To find out, I went all the way back to the beginning," Bob explained, "to the very first case of a strange research abortion that I could find. It took place nineteen years ago, two years before my father became aware of these events and wrote the article." He picked up the piece of paper again. "At that time, two students abandoned their research in the middle of an extraordinary series of biochemical tests on organic behaviour-altering agents called *pheromones*. That incident, according to my dad's research, in a way marks the origin of the secret poaching system that subsequently developed."

"*Pheromones*?" asked Pete, irritated. "And how did that help you get to the insider?"

"The *pheromones* alone would not have been enough," Bob admitted, "but fortunately there was a brief explanation of this project. It says that a special combination of these substances should lead to a 'catalyzing intensification of hypnosis treatments'." Triumphantly, Bob looked around. "And now guess who these two students and all the subsequent dropouts were in regular consultation with just before their sudden change of courses."

"Maria Elena Fernandez..." murmured Jupiter. "So that's her dark secret that she wants to protect at all costs. Not Mr Garvine, but she is the Teumessian fox! The caretaker has merely made use of the myth that already exists, but without being its originator."

"And Mrs Fernandez let him because she knew he would make a perfect culprit if anyone got too close to Ruxton's secret," Bob added.

"Right. Meanwhile, she continued to expand her criminal system. For years, she poached the university's greatest talents and let them continue to work on her projects in secret—without legal limits or restrictions."

"But with huge profit margins," added TJ.

"Then... maybe Garvine's frog drugs weren't responsible for the strange incidents at the university, but forbidden hypnosis experiments by this psychologist," Pete concluded perplexedly.

"It definitely was with me," Jupe replied grimly. "Besides, I just remembered that I also wanted to ask Mrs Fernandez about behaviour modification during my visit, but she obviously sensed the danger that I might pursue this idea and also come up with hypnosis as the cause of the strange events. So she somehow put me in a trance to nip this approach in the bud immediately and bring me back to the Garvine line and the frog poison."

"That woman is really cunning..." Bob muttered.

The Second Investigator looked excitedly at his friends. "Maybe hypnosis was involved when Mrs Fernandez stopped the publication of Bob's father's article back then. After all, she absolutely had to prevent the public from becoming aware of the strange research abortions."

"Good deduction, Pete," praised Jupiter. "Moreover, it is not at all unlikely that her hypnotic influence also brought about the termination of Mr Andrews's research into the Teumessian fox and his subsequent change of university. After all, we now know that he was not on the trail of Mr Garvine, but of the psychologist."

"That could indeed have been the case..." Bob replied thoughtfully. At the thought of the photo and his father's clear, unclouded gaze, however, Bob immediately began to doubt his words. At least there was now a straw for him to clutch at. If Bill Andrews had been under hypnotic control at the time, his decisions had not been made of his own free will.

Jupiter nodded. "That could also explain Mrs Fernandez's alleged proximity to the suspicious Mr Roalstad. That way she could keep an optimal eye on him. Only now, when

the story boiled up too much through our investigation, did she feel compelled to take more extreme measures.”

Pete puffed angrily. “By sending Mr Roalstad on an accident trip with one of her mind tricks!”

“He must definitely have had a clue along those lines,” Bob noted, “because earlier on the phone he told me that the Teumessian fox was not a he, but a she.”

“You spoke to Mr Roalstad?” asked TJ in amazement. “I thought he was seriously injured in hospital.”

“He called me briefly, yes. He’s much better, but his overprotective wife forbids him any excitement and has condemned him to a convalescent holiday in Oregon, where he can’t be reached by anyone.”

“Well, we will still notify him as soon as everything is cleared up,” the First Investigator decided. “Before that, however, we have one last assignment.”

He stood up and looked out of the window, thirsty for action. “After the Teumessian fox has misled us several times, it is high time to finally wrest this well-kept secret and bring the dark side of Mrs Fernandez to light!”

## 14. On the Trail of the Fox

Given the special circumstances, The Three Investigators decided to let Taylor-Jackson in on the finale of this great adventure. They also decided that it was strategically best to start after dark. Except for Pete, who was assigned to secretly shadow the psychologist from now on, the boys went about their normal university activities for the time being.

Around nine o'clock in the evening, they met in front of the Psychological Counselling Centre, where Mrs Fernandez was still working in her office. According to Pete, nothing conspicuous had happened so far.

Cautiously, the boys took up position behind a lush rhododendron bush. In addition to flashlights, Jupiter and Bob had also brought along some detective equipment, just in case.

Bob had meanwhile stowed Mr Garvine's folder under the mattress of his bed. He had wanted to take the grisly photo along with him to remind himself that he still have a dark secret to solve, but after a moment's thought, he decided against doing that in case he lost it. As an alternative, he used his camera to take a picture of the photo and brought it along.

By now, this area of the university grounds was deserted. From afar, only the soft music of a charity party hosted by Mrs Breckenridge drifted over to them from the Convention Centre.

As the curtains of Mrs Fernandez's office window were not drawn, the boys could see that the woman was still engrossed in her work on the computer.

"What's that hanging from the side of her hair?" asked Bob in amazement. "It almost looks like a little blue bird."

"To be exact, a hummingbird," Jupiter corrected. "She had those flashy bird earrings on whenever I met her. Family heirlooms, perhaps." He took a deep breath. "So, let's get on with our little show."

With a tense expression, he now took out his mobile phone and dialled Mrs Fernandez's office number. After a brief, obviously puzzled hesitation, the psychologist picked up the phone. "Yes?"

"Mrs Fernandez?" the First Investigator murmured in a low disguised voice. "We have a control problem here with the flybots and need your assessment of it."

"Kendrick?" asked Mrs Fernandez, puzzled. "You know you're not supposed to contact me on the official line! What are you still doing down there anyway? The temporary project stop has been in effect since this afternoon, right?"

Jupiter now began to scratch the mobile phone casing with his fingers to feign interference in the connection.

"Reception... extremely poor. I... can hardly hear you—" Then he hung up.

Tense to the tips of their hair, the boys now watched as the psychologist paused in obvious irritation and slowly hung up the phone. Then she stood up and walked with energetic steps to the door.

"It's working!" whispered Bob excitedly.

Jupe smiled triumphantly. "Not only that. From Mrs Fernandez's reply, I gather that the secret research area is not occupied for the time being. So we will most likely not expect any opponents during our expedition."



“That’s more than fine with me,” Pete murmured softly.

The boys watched the entrance door attentively, from which the psychologist stepped out, looked around suspiciously and walked away in a westerly direction. Skilfully using every cover, the four followed her. As Jupiter had already suspected, Mrs Fernandez directed her steps towards the former auditorium. Arriving at the L-shaped building, she looked around again on all sides before heading purposefully for the main entrance, unlocking it and disappearing into the building.

Ducked, their pursuers scurried after her and after Pete picked the lock on the door, they slipped into the building one by one. Since their flashlights would give them away, the moonlight shining through the dirty windows had to suffice for orientation.

The large corridor, smeared everywhere with graffiti, lay before them like a gloomy tunnel. Large holes yawned in the ceiling where plasterboard had once been—a sea of rubbish, plaster and shards covered the floor. But there was no sign of Mrs Fernandez.

“Where is she?” asked Bob in a pressed voice.

“Be quiet!” Jupiter ordered in a whisper.

Tensely, the boys listened to the silence. Sure enough, they now heard soft footsteps moving further and further away.

The First Investigator pointed forward. “That’s coming from the stairwell. Go!”

As quietly as possible, the boys hurried down the corridor and paused at the stairs. The faint glow of a flashlight shone up from below.

“She’s going down to the basement,” whispered the Second Investigator with obvious discomfort. “It’s pitch dark down there...”

“We have no other choice,” Jupiter replied tersely. “Hold on to the railing and we’ll make it.”

Carefully, the quartet crept down the stairs. Having reached the lowest level, Jupiter, who was in front, looked strained into the pitch-dark main room. A distant dull glow told him that the psychologist was in the corridor that branched off to the left.

The First Investigator turned. “Everyone grab the person in front by the belt, I’ll go ahead.”

In single file, the boys felt their way along the cracked wall through the room and into the corridor. At the very end, about fifteen metres away, Mrs Fernandez had opened a door on the right.

“You stay here for now,” Jupe whispered. “I’ll stalk closer to see what she’s doing.”

“Just be careful,” Bob murmured, but by then the First Investigator had already crept off.

When he was close enough to see into the room, he realized in the diffuse glow of Mrs Fernandez’s flashlight that it was the disgusting storeroom he had seen in his earlier exploratory visit here. The dead rat was still lying in the oily brown pool, the pervasive stench of which Jupiter could detect even from this distance.

Irritated, the First Investigator watched as the psychologist now approached the massive boiler that was covered all over with rust. She opened a small flap on its side and then stuck her right arm in up to her shoulder, only to pull it out again a second later. Jupiter’s eyes widened in surprise when suddenly, with a barely audible hum, the entire boiler swung to one side on an invisible joint, revealing a circular hole in the floor.

Without hesitation, Mrs Fernandez slid into the opening and climbed down, apparently on a ladder, into the depths. From the increasingly dim light of the torch, Jupiter concluded that the shaft led many metres downwards. Then the boiler swung back to its original position and inky blackness enveloped the First Investigator. Hastily, he took out his own flashlight, switched it on and signalled to his friends to come to him.

In terse sentences he told them what he had just seen. Then, wrinkling his nose, he stepped over the brown puddle, went to the boiler and opened the flap on the side. Suspiciously, he shone a light inside.

“Well?” asked Taylor-Jackson excitedly.

“This secret entrance is really cleverly designed,” Jupiter noted. “The beastly smelling liquid with the dead rat alone is a powerful deterrent. I’m guessing some kind of sulphurous mixture that is constantly renewed to keep the stench constant and keep uninvited visitors away.”

“Lovely,” Pete murmured and protectively held his hand over his mouth. The disgusting broth even made his eyes water.

The First Investigator pointed to the opening in the huge metal cylinder. “But even if someone were to stray into this room, I guarantee they wouldn’t think of voluntarily reaching into the boiler. It’s crawling with cobwebs so thick you can’t see ten centimetres inside.”

“A giant spider’s nest for protection from trespassers,” Bob murmured with a contorted face.

“Are... you really going to reach in there?” asked Taylor-Jackson in disgust.

Jupe nodded resolutely. “This is the only way to get into the secret underworld. Besides, I suspect that this is not really a dwelling of countless creepy-crawlies, but artificial cobwebs that only serve as a deterrent. This web, at least, looks strangely undamaged, although Mrs Fernandez did just reach in here.” He heaved a soft sigh. “Either way, I’ll have to try...”

With hardened features, Jupiter pushed his right arm into the narrow opening while his friends held their breath in excitement.

“There!” exclaimed the First Investigator. “I feel something! Could be some kind of switch.” After a soft click sounded, he hastily pulled his arm out again. Sure enough—just as moments before, the boiler swung almost silently to one side, revealing the shaft below. The metal rungs of a ladder shone in the beam of flashlight.

Grimly determined, Jupiter approached the opening. “Now then—I’ll climb down first, you follow me. The closing mechanism seems to be somewhere at the end of the shaft.”

“Don’t operate it until the last one of us is down,” Pete warned. “This huge boiler could cut your head off...”

As Jupiter had already assumed, it went down several metres. Finally, his left foot touched solid ground again.

“I’ve reached the bottom!” he whispered to Bob standing above him, who relayed the message.

Hesitantly, the First Investigator turned around and shone his flashlight on the tunnel wall. He quickly spotted the outline of a door and a metal handle, next to which was a small toggle switch. First he made sure that all the boys were in the shaft. Then he flicked the switch, whereupon TJ, standing at the top, confirmed that the boiler was swinging back.

With his lips pressed together, Jupiter now reached for the door handle and slowly pushed it down. He heard a soft clicking sound, then pushed the door forward millimetre by millimetre. He winced in surprise.

Bright white light shone at him through the narrow gap and blinded him for a brief moment. Jupiter paused for a few seconds until his eyes adjusted to the sudden brightness and widened the gap so he could peer out.

The sight almost left him speechless. Mr Garvine’s secret laboratory had already been an exciting discovery, but this was beyond anything the First Investigator could have imagined.

In front of him was a gigantic hall, reminiscent in appearance and dimension of a futuristic, yet deserted airport terminal. Steel and chrome gleamed as far as the eye could see;

dozens of digital display panels with strange combinations of numbers and letters hung from the high ceilings. The interior itself was filled with countless honeycomb-like cubicles, their wrap-around glass offering a breathtaking view of an army of laboratory benches and alien apparatus. Between the columns of cubicles, long corridors marked with white numbers stretched throughout the hall. In one of them, a small vehicle could even be seen, which looked like a golf cart and was obviously used to transport people over long distances. For a brief moment, Jupe had to think of Mr Blofeld's secret spaceport in the James Bond movie *You Only Live Twice*.

"This is not just a hiding place for some illegal experiments," he muttered, stunned. "This is a secret world beneath Ruxton—a shadow world..."

## 15. The Shadow World

“Shadow world?” asked Bob standing over him, irritated. “What are you talking about? And what about Mrs Fernandez?”

Only now did Jupiter realize that he had not thought about the psychologist because of the overwhelming sight. Hectically, he let his gaze wander through the huge hall, but could not see the psychologist anywhere. Now, however, he recognized doors and strange dark windows in the outer walls at regular intervals. This secret facility therefore extended even beyond the hall. And behind one of the many doors was where Mrs Fernandez must have gone into. It was an ideal opportunity to take photos for evidence!

Quietly, he signalled to Bob that the coast was clear and cautiously stepped into the hall. One by one, the other boys followed. They felt the same as Jupiter earlier—sheer bewilderment was written on their faces.

“This... can’t be true,” Pete breathed incredulously.

Dumbfounded, Taylor-Jackson looked from one end of the hall to the other. “How could such a gigantic facility have been built without anyone noticing?”

“I have no idea,” Jupiter confessed. “But more important now than clarifying this question is documenting our discovery.” He made an inviting hand gesture in the direction of Bob.

Bob had understood. He took out the camera he had brought with him and started taking photos of the hall.

“We should hurry,” Pete hissed uneasily. “When Mrs Fernandez realizes there’s no one at the flybot department, the scam will be blown.”

“Don’t worry, we’ll retreat in a minute,” the First Investigator said. “I just want to take a quick look in one of the dark windows.”

He stepped up to the nearest of the floor-to-ceiling windows, about three by two metres, shielded his eyes from the white light with his hands and peered inside. “Strange... the light doesn’t seem to penetrate inside at all. You can’t make out anything in the darkness except a few indistinct shadows.” Then he faltered abruptly. “But something is moving in there!”

“What?” TJ exclaimed.

The other boys now also joined in hesitantly.

“Indeed,” Bob whispered. “That shadow back there keeps moving from left to right. But what is that?”

Suspiciously, Pete walked a few steps further and looked through another window. Here, too, there was deep darkness inside. After a few seconds, his eyes perceived vague contours at the back of the room. It was an elongated shadow whose shape Pete could not place. It seemed to be enormous in size and lay completely motionless on the floor. But wait—hadn’t the right end of the shadow just twitched? The Second Investigator stared intently into the darkness.

And suddenly everything happened very quickly. The shadow, which had just been lying there calmly, literally exploded, lunged forward and threw itself against the window! Shocked, Pete saw a huge lizard head, its mouth wide open and armed with countless sharp

fangs, greedily snapping at him. Seized by sheer panic, the boy stumbled back and fell to the floor.

"A dragon!" he cried in horror. "They're breeding dragons here!"

Hastily, the boys rushed to him. While Bob and TJ helped the Second Investigator up, Jupiter looked in amazement at the supposed monster, which was still scratching at the window in a wild frenzy, but without making the slightest sound.

"Pete is not so wrong," he observed, fascinated. "This is indeed a kind of dragon—not a mythical creature, though, but an animal of flesh and blood."

Bob looked over in amazement at the huge behemoth, which seemed to be gradually calming down again. "Is that... a monitor lizard?"

"Bull's eye," Jupe confirmed. "In terms of imposing size, this is probably, to be precise, the largest lizard in the world—the Komodo dragon, sometimes also called the Komodo monitor."

"You're saying there are monster lizards this huge somewhere in the world?" asked Pete, stunned.

"Indeed, and mainly on the Indonesian island of Komodo, to which these monitor lizards owe their name. Large males can reach a length of over three metres."

"Madness," whispered Taylor-Jackson.

"You took the words right out of my mouth," Jupiter replied, concerned. "That's madness. Komodo dragons are very rare and are on the list of endangered species." He pointed at the window. "The specimen in there seems to be even significantly larger than three metres—more like four, maybe even more. That's why I have the terrible suspicion that some grotesque breeding experiments are taking place down here."

Pete swallowed involuntarily. "An underground Komodo dragon lab..."

"And next door is where his prey is kept," replied Bob, who had now stepped back to the first window and was peering in with narrowed eyes. "If I'm not mistaken, those are pigs in there. They seem to be covered in dark fur, though."

"The howls of the razorbacks!" Jupiter snapped. "So the bioacoustic specialist was indeed right. Only it wasn't free-ranging wild boars we heard, but these lab animals. Something must have gone wrong with the sound insulation for a short time so the howls got out."

Hesitantly, Pete approached another pane. "There seems to be some kind of scaffolding of trees and branches in here. You can make out several shadows on it—maybe monkeys or large birds."

"I can't even imagine what's hidden in all those other rooms," Bob murmured in dismay. "A zoo of horrors, deep underground..."

The First Investigator nodded. "One can only hope that the coming investigations will find solid evidence of Mrs Fernandez's activities. It is high time that the unscrupulous Teumessian fox is finally brought to justice." He turned his gaze to the ceiling. "If you didn't know, you wouldn't believe it. Above ground lies the normal university and below, deep in hiding, its distorted grimace—like a monstrous mirror image."

"Mirror..." Suddenly a flash of inspiration came to Bob.

While the others were still gazing into the dark windows, Bob quickly pulled out his camera and frantically scrolled along to search for the photo showing his father with Garvine and the hooded person.

The arrest of Garvine had just about confirmed that he was not the leader of the secret society. Now it had occurred to Bob that the stance and reverent posture of the hooded person

on the left was directed at the person behind the camera. That could mean that the hooded person was also not the leader!

In the emotional state of surprise while looking at the photo earlier, Bob had no eyes for further details. Now, he realized something that he might have missed—the mighty mirror behind the eerie altar! It was possible that the person who had taken this photo could be seen in it! Perhaps that was the leader of the shadow world—the Teumessian fox. It could well be Maria Elena Fernandez!

Hmm... Garvine and Fernandez... Bob bit his lower lip energetically. Garvine was therefore a follower of Mrs Fernandez and knew the real secret of Ruxton. But why had the psychologist delivered him to the knife so coldly? Bob did not have time to think about it any further—all this would be cleared up as soon as Mrs Fernandez was convicted.

Bob finally found the photo and displayed it on the camera's screen. Then he zoomed in and squinted his eyes to try to search for more clues.

Wait a second! Just as Bob was about to scroll to the mirror, he paused and his eyes widened in surprise. Like an ice-cold shower, the realization hit him that he and his friends had been wrong again. He saw something small protruding from the hood of the hooded person. Now, with magnification, Bob was one hundred percent sure what it was—Mrs Fernandez's strikingly shaped hummingbird earrings! So she even wore those sort of earrings way back then.

Bob stared at the photo in disbelief. Confusing as it was, the hooded person was Mrs Fernandez, so she could not be the Teumessian fox! Now, the all-important question was—who was the person behind the camera? He quickly scrolled to the mirror and squinted his eyes again—and was stunned. Before he could say anything, he was interrupted by Jupiter turning away from the window and reaching into his trouser pocket for his mobile phone.

"We've seen enough," the First Investigator announced. "Mrs Fernandez doesn't seem to have heard us, but she has been down here for a conspicuously long time. So we shouldn't take any chances and alert the police now. Let me see if I have reception down here, otherwise I'll try—"

Before he could even finish the sentence, Taylor-Jackson suddenly jumped up to him, grabbed the surprised First Investigator by the head with both hands and shouted the word 'Clytemnestra!' in his face.

Jupiter's reaction was frightening. Immediately his eyes veiled like a sleepwalker's and in a jerky movement, he put the mobile phone back in his pocket. Under the shocked looks of Pete and Bob, he now raised both fists in the air and shouted in a distorted voice: "When the snakes eat the fire, the moon rules!"

He then rushed to the Komodo dragon's window and punched it as if out of his mind. Horrified, Bob and Pete rushed to him and tried to hold him back, but their friend suddenly seemed to have super-human powers.

"Jupe! Come to yourself!" Pete shouted at him.

Bob grabbed the First Investigator by the shoulders and stared him straight in the eye. "This is not you! You're under hypnosis! Fight it!"

Suddenly a twitch shot through Jupiter's eyelids and his tenseness began to ease. Slowly he lowered his trembling fists. Somehow, the hypnotic spell was broken.

"What... happened?" he asked in boundless confusion.

Only now did Bob and Pete realize that during Jupiter's seizure they had not thought about TJ at all. At the same time, they whirled around—and looked into the sweaty face of Taylor-Jackson, who was holding a can-shaped object in his right hand.

"You don't move or I'll spray highly concentrated irritant gas in your eyes, understand?"

“You miserable rascal!” hissed Pete angrily. “So you’re a servant of Mrs Fernandez—a lapdog of the Teumessian fox!”

“Not quite...” the deep voice of the psychologist now sounded from the background.

## 16. The Mask Falls

“Taylor-Jackson has indeed been in the service of the fox for a short time... but that is not me, that is—”

“Mrs Francine Breckenridge...” Bob completed the sentence. Although the zoomed portion of the photo wasn’t very clear, he could make something out on the mirror—the unmistakable hairstyle and glasses of the patroness of Ruxton.

“Quite so,” confirmed Mrs Breckenridge, who suddenly appeared alongside the psychologist, followed by her stocky assistant and two security guards in grey uniforms. With a cold smile, she pointed at TJ. “He seemed like the ideal person to keep a close eye on you guys. After all, I wanted to make sure that after Garvine’s arrest, you would finally keep your feet still.”

“We were sure you wouldn’t be suspicious of Taylor-Jackson after the snake bite,” Mrs Fernandez added. “After all, he was a victim himself. So I paid him a visit at the Medical Centre and, as they say, made him an offer he couldn’t refuse. He was to stay on you and avoid alerting the police in case of emergency.”

“... By triggering a seizure in Jupiter with your secret trigger word,” Pete concluded in horror.

“That’s right,” the psychologist confirmed, “but I had no idea how quickly you would change course and literally follow my heels. Pretty clever, your trick with the phone call. It was quite a scare when our secret security service reported your intrusion to me. Of course, I immediately informed Mrs Breckenridge, who was at the charity party and wanted to deal with the problem personally.” Her smile disappeared and she looked sternly across at Taylor-Jackson. “Obviously, for some reason, our snitch failed to give us a heads up.”

The boy blinked nervously. “During the class, Jupiter sat right next to me and afterwards the four of us were together all the time. There was no way I could make contact with you.” He looked over at Mrs Fernandez in intimidation. “But when Jupiter wanted to call the police, I did exactly as instructed!”

“We will investigate the matter thoroughly and then decide on the sentence for your negligence,” Mrs Breckenridge replied coldly.

“The ruler of the underworld has spoken,” Jupe stated hoarsely. With narrowed eyes, he turned his gaze from Mrs Breckenridge to the psychologist. “So in truth, you are only a servant of the Teumessian fox, nothing more.”

“I prefer ‘right-hand woman’,” the patroness replied, “a loyal comrade-in-arms since I brought her to my side twenty years ago to build this empire.”

Bob snorted angrily. “You set up this shadow world and Mrs Fernandez recruited your disciples. But what role did Mr Garvine play?”

“He was the catalyst for the whole project,” Mrs Breckenridge replied candidly. “I’ve been volunteering at the university for a quarter of a century, ever since I took over my father’s legacy. The old do-gooder invested almost his entire fortune in Ruxton because this is where the roots of his career lie.”

“And this charitable work of your father’s was a thorn in your side,” Pete surmised.

“You could say that. It was almost unbearable to me how he squandered his money.”



“So when your father died, you were only carrying on his legacy in pretence,” the First Investigator commented. “In secret, you embarked on a different course, aimed solely at personal enrichment.”

“That sounds a bit too harsh, but you’re absolutely right about the change of course,” the patroness confirmed with a smile. “When Lemuel Garvine was expelled back then and I looked into his case a little, I realized what great potential this man had. He just needed a suitable environment where he could continue to work on his great experiments without petty legislation.”

Bob snorted contemptuously. “Great experiments? You mean innovative frog poison drugs with which he could make a fortune for himself and thus for you! That’s why you brought Garvine back to the university in his disguise as a caretaker and set up a secret lab for him.”

“Correct.” Mrs Breckenridge beamed. She actually seemed to think the whole thing was an admirable achievement. “After a while, however, I realized that I was only using the tip of a huge iceberg. The university offered infinitely more resources. I just had to make them available to me.”

“That’s where Mrs Fernandez came in,” Jupiter surmised. “You had probably become aware of the young lecturer’s extraordinary abilities early on. At some point, you took her into your confidence and promised her unlimited possibilities if she would continue her hypnosis research in secret from then on.”

“The prospect was irresistible,” Mrs Fernandez confessed. “My scholarship was running out and I barely had any money. Mrs Breckenridge secured my future at Ruxton.”

“And in return, you willingly helped her to grow more and more new talent, which you specifically influenced during your counselling sessions,” Jupe added.

The patroness raised her eyebrows appreciatively. “Truly a clever trio...”

“But... why did you have this facility built here of all places?” Pete asked.

“At the very beginning, Garvine’s lab served as our research centre, but soon...” the patroness explained and pointed to the huge hall with shining eyes, “it was time to expand.”

“And how did you manage to make sure that no one knew about this place?” It was Bob’s turn to probe.

“That was the genius of it,” Mrs Breckenridge replied cheerfully. “The construction was completely open from start to finish, and even with the university’s participation.”

“You can’t be serious!” Bob snapped.

“Your irritation is understandable, but the explanation is as simple as can be. Shortly before my father died, he launched his biggest foundation project for Ruxton—the underground Breckenridge Research Centre for Molecular Physics. After two years, this gigantic facility was about to be inaugurated, but regrettably, a routine pollutant check revealed hazardous chrysotile contamination throughout the building.”

“White asbestos, then. You probably exerted some influence on the corresponding expert opinion and the subsequent careful cover-up,” Jupiter speculated.

The patroness grinned. “Good guess. A complete refurbishment was not economically feasible, so this entire site was sealed up and the access building on the grounds of the Faculty of Physics was demolished.”

“So the actual entrance to this underworld was quite a distance away at that time,” Pete concluded, who had Ruxton’s layout plan pretty well in his head by now.

“That’s how it is. In the time that followed, we created new access points, well disguised of course. You have already used one of them.”

“Truly well disguised,” Bob replied. “You were probably also responsible for shutting down the old auditorium and preventing its renovation. After all, thanks to the disgusting camouflage of the boiler access, you had nothing to fear.”

“At least until you came.” Mrs Breckenridge winked. “After today’s encroachment, we will of course review our security system. And I could certainly use three smart guys like you.”

Pete puffed angrily. “You expect us to join your shadow world?” Out of the corner of his eye, however, he noticed that Jupiter was secretly signalling him to hold back. Therefore he swallowed the swear words that were on his tongue again.

“Why not?” asked Mrs Breckenridge. “You would undoubtedly be an asset to my team and your future prospects would be simply fantastic. Believe me—nowhere will you find opportunities for development like here.” She spread her arms in a euphoric gesture. “In this world, anything is possible!”

Mrs Fernandez nodded. “Over the years, we have built a thriving network into higher circles through secret channels. Our range of services is unique worldwide, which is why our internal slogan is: ‘We Fulfil the Impossible!’”

Jupiter grinned in mock interest. “And our slogan is ‘We Investigate Anything’.

Admittedly, that would complement each other quite well.”

“Quite well? That would fit marvellously!” Mrs Breckenridge’s eyes lit up with excitement. “You would be part of a real wonderland! However exotic the wishes of our clients—we fulfil them! Be it giant Komodo dragons for a Chinese billionaire, artificial spy birds for a politician from Eastern Europe, or hypnosis preparations for a South American secret service—nothing is impossible!”

“And what exactly does all this have to do with the Teumessian fox?” Bob wanted to know.

The patroness winked. “I confess quite openly that I have a certain penchant for theatricality—but of course I only live it out in the circle of our secret society. The mythological figure of the Teumessian fox has always appealed to me. I found the idea fascinating that there is a creature that cannot be caught by anything or anyone in the world.”

“That’s exactly how you felt and made yourself the Teumessian fox of Ruxton,” Jupiter concluded.

“Indeed. Since Lemuel Garvine was my first disciple at that time, I appointed him my high priest, so to speak.” Mrs Breckenridge smiled pensively. “On special occasions like the inductions of new members, we even perform a little ritual with special clothing and all the trimmings. Well, you’ll see it as soon as we’ve come to an agreement.”

Bob had winced briefly at the mention of ‘new members’. He recalled the photo of his father with Garvine, and his worst fears seemed to be confirmed after all—Bill Andrews had become a member of Mrs Breckenridge’s shadow world...

“But... if Mr Garvine was your confidant, why did you let him take the fall?” asked Pete.

The patroness sighed. “Because he is my most loyal follower, in fact, he is one hundred percent loyal. He would never betray me. That’s why, from the beginning, he took on the burden of assuming the role of the fox, including taking the guilty verdict if necessary.” A grin flitted across her face. “But good Lemuel will fall very softly. I will know how to see to that. His stay in prison will be short and comfortable.”

“Thanks to your immense influence...” Bob added. “You also used it in earlier cases as soon as any danger threatened to arise. You hurt Mr Roalstad in an accident and eventually sent him to Oregon; you lured Corvy to Yale with a hastily arranged scholarship; and Mr Emery probably received a clear threat that caused him to go into hiding for the time being.”

Mrs Breckenridge beamed. "I can only repeat myself—you are very clever boys."

Jupiter folded his arms. "And you are an extremely self-convinced power wielder who believes that wealth can shape the whole world according to your wishes."

The patroness's gaze was now ice-cold. "Not the whole world, but certainly this one. And I will not allow anyone to jeopardize it. It happened once and it will never happen again."

"I remember it very well!" a firm voice suddenly sounded from the background.

All heads whirled to the newcomer.

"Dad!" cried Bob, stunned.

## 17. The Return of the Hunter

In the same second, Pete seized his chance, lunged at TJ and knocked the spray can away from him.

The assistant jerked forward, but Mrs Breckenridge held him back with a curt wave of her hand. She obviously wanted to assess the situation before acting. Mrs Fernandez also remained motionless.

“Bill Andrews,” the patroness stated with laboriously suppressed astonishment. “Who would have thought that after all these years we would be facing each other again...”

“Where did you come from so suddenly?” asked Jupiter perplexed.

“A friend from the old days called me earlier,” Mr Andrews replied calmly. “Mr Roalstad. He seemed very confused and I could hardly understand him, but two names were unmistakable—‘Bob’ and ‘Teumessian fox’. I realized something must have happened, so I drove here immediately and watched you so I could intervene if things got dicey.” He sighed softly. “I suspected that my son and his friends had stumbled onto a dangerous trail—a trail I had abandoned seventeen years ago...”

“But... why, Dad?” asked Bob, embarrassed. “And why didn’t you ever say anything about it?”

“Because we had made a pact,” Mrs Breckenridge replied coldly. “We had, of course, become aware at the time of your father’s exceptional journalistic talent and his research. So we made him an offer to join our society and put his skills at our service.”

Bob immediately remembered the terrible photo with Mr Garvine and his dad. He looked over at his father and asked: “And... you said yes?”

“Unfortunately no!” the patroness forestalled a reply. “Your noble father said he could not reconcile such a step with his conscience.” She hissed contemptuously. “He was the first and only one in twenty years to refuse our offer... but of course we couldn’t just let him go.”

Mr Andrews’s features hardened. “I was summoned to the Teumessian fox hall and a deal was staged with me. I was to cease all research into the shadow world of Ruxton forever and leave the university. In return, I was promised the safety of my wife and...”—he glanced at his son—“and of you, Bob.”

The Three Investigators were speechless in the face of this incredible revelation.

“We were married young and you were already on your way,” Mr Andrews continued. “I couldn’t risk losing you. So I accepted the pact and allowed the sealing of the agreement to be captured in a photograph. Every year, on the same day, I always receive a print of the photo by anonymous mail to remind me of my promise.”

“So... you were never part of this shadow world,” Bob said, a stone the size of Mount Everest having just fallen from his heart. “The photo doesn’t show you joining the shadow world at all, it shows you turning your back on it forever!”

“You know this photo?” asked Jupe, confused.

But before Bob could answer, his father continued. “You can’t imagine how much this matter has weighed on my mind all these years. At that time, it was the first and only time that I put my journalistic responsibilities aside in favour of personal interests. Since then, I have fought in every hour, every minute of my work to do the right thing and never again

sacrifice my ideals to a compromise. I have vowed to be the best journalist I could possibly become and to never deviate from my goal in the search for truth.”

Mrs Breckenridge sighed regretfully. “So now your unwavering pursuit of truth will finally break your neck... Surely you realize the consequences you have to face.”

“You are mistaken,” Mr Andrews replied without any fear. “It is not I who will perish, but the Teumessian fox and the entire empire!” He pointed to a button on his light-coloured linen jacket. “This here is a highly sensitive microphone whose signal is picked up by two of my colleagues above. Already from my cover I have recorded the entire conversation—including your comprehensive statements on all the illegal machinations that are taking place here. I guarantee you that later today on the late news, the whole country will hear about Mrs Breckenridge and her underground shadow world!”

At that moment, an alarm siren blared and the light in the hall changed from white to red.

“Security has been breached in several places!” the assistant shouted.

“That will be the police, who have been alerted by my colleagues by now,” Mr Andrews stated impassively. “There are probably already emergency services swarming up there.”

The reaction of the opponents was very different. While Taylor-Jackson slumped down, moaning quietly, the assistant, who had turned white as a sheet, turned on his heel and ran away without even bothering about his boss. The two uniformed men hesitated briefly, then also took flight. Mrs Fernandez’s face now also showed the utmost tension, but she remained steadfast at Mrs Breckenridge’s side. The patroness, meanwhile, irritatingly showed no visible signs of panic, but turned to the psychologist in an emphatically calm manner.

“Maria, if you would please remind me later to give Vincent and the two deadbeats an appropriate punishment for their blatant neglect of duty.”

“It won’t come to that,” Bob’s father replied harshly. “Face it, Francine—the game is up!”

With an ice-cold expression, Mrs Breckenridge now turned her gaze on Bob’s father. “You still don’t seem to have learned the most important lesson, Bill. In this world, I alone make the rules.”

With these words, she pulled out an elongated, silvery object that resembled a remote control, pressed one of several buttons on it and smiled triumphantly. “Now the secret entrance behind you has been hermetically sealed. The police would have to come with a demolition squad to get in here. And while they are still busy looking for other entrances, Maria and I will now take our elegant leave.”

“I guess we have something to say about that,” Pete replied grimly and lifted the spray can.

“Fool!” the patroness replied condescendingly. “Do you really think you can stop me with this childish stuff?”

In a casual and surprisingly quick movement, she pointed the silver remote control at Pete and pressed a button again. With a crackling hiss, a bluish flash now shot from the device tip towards the Second Investigator and struck him on the wrist. Pete cried out in surprise, dropped the can and fell down in pain.

As Jupiter, Bob and Bill Andrews rushed to him, Mrs Breckenridge’s lips twisted into a sneer. “Don’t worry—the beam was on the lowest power level. The numbness in his hand will soon wear off. Anyway, he only needs his legs to run away.”

“Run away?” cried Jupiter angrily. “From you?”

The patroness shook her head in amusement. “Not at all, young man. I shall now retire discreetly. But, of course, I cannot leave my guests without the assurance of due entertainment.” She pointed the remote control at the window of the Komodo dragon. “May I

introduce... *Fènnù Lóng!*” Before she had even uttered the strange name, a bright beep sounded and the dark window swung backwards with a dull buzzing sound, followed by a rumbling hiss from the darkness.

While Mrs Breckenridge and the psychologist hurried to the electric vehicle parked some distance away, those left behind stared in shock at the open enclosure, from which wild snorting and a rapidly increasing rumbling could now be heard. Finally, Bill Andrews snapped out of his terror.

“Come on, run through the lab maze and hide in the corridors—I’ll try to lure the beast away!”

“This is insane, Dad!” cried Bob in shock. “This monster is as big as a car! It will tear you apart!”

“Don’t argue, Bob!” Bill Andrews’s look invited no further protest.

Hastily, the four boys ran and shortly afterwards, turned right into one of the corridors between the research cubicles. From a distance, distorted by the many panes of glass in the lab, they saw a huge grey shadow emerge from the dark opening in the wall and stretch its elongated head in all directions, sniffing.

The First Investigator sucked in the air, spellbound. “The dragon rises from its cave...”

## 18. The Last Fight of Laelaps

In the red alarm light of the hall, the unreal event actually appeared like the scene from a monster movie. The only difference was that this dragon was terribly real.

Now Mr Andrews jumped out from behind a large ventilation pipe and shouted: “Here I am, you monster! Come on!”

With that, he whirled around and ran. For a fraction of a second, a twitch shot through the Komodo dragon’s huge body, as if a grey mountain were shaking. Then the monstrous lizard chased after Bob’s father with terrifying speed.

Bob looked at his friends in despair. “What are we going to do? We can’t leave Dad in the lurch!”

“We won’t either,” Jupiter replied resolutely and looked around frantically. At the sight of a large fire extinguisher, an idea suddenly occurred to him. “Bob, you and I will distract the Komodo dragon. Pete, you follow the two ladies and see where they escape to! And you —” He turned his scowl on TJ. “Just get out of my sight!”

At top speed, the Second Investigator sprinted after the vehicle roaring away in the distance, while Jupiter tore the fire extinguisher from its anchorage and tampered with the spray head.

A deafening crash and splintering from the rear of the hall indicated that Mr Andrews had now also fled to the lab area and the gigantic lizard was following him like an unleashed bulldozer. Since the alarm siren had fallen silent again, every sound reached them crystal clear.

With an energetic gesture, Jupiter pointed to the other labs. “Quick, see if you can find anything else useful!”

Just a few seconds later, Bob had made a discovery. “Here’s a control panel with several dozen switches, labels and green lights! Only one of them is flashing red and underneath it says ‘*Varanus komodoensis*’!”

“Bull’s eye! That must be the control panel for opening and closing the animal enclosures! Maybe we can get the Komodo dragon locked up again!”

At that moment, the First Investigator spotted several strangely shaped mobile phones on a lab table. They looked different from Garvine’s futuristic mobile phone, because the shimmering glass cases appeared solid and had classic keyboards. Without hesitation, Juve slipped two of them into his trouser pockets. “You stay at the control panel and be ready to press the button!”

“All right! But just be careful!”

Jupiter quickly ran back with the fire extinguisher to the large main corridor to the lab area, placed the device on the floor and pulled the laces of his right shoe out of the loops with erratic movements.

About fifteen metres away, Bill Andrews, who had apparently stumbled over several tables, now also stormed out of the lab area. When he spotted the First Investigator, he wildly rowed his arms to get him to run away. But Jupiter now raised his arm in turn and held up the fire extinguisher. Bob’s father seemed to have understood, just before the giant lizard burst out of the splintering rows of cubicles like an antediluvian dinosaur, Mr Andrews dived for

cover. Hesitantly, the lizard paused in search of its missing prey, swirling its mighty head in all directions and licking the air with its long, forked tongue.

Crouched behind a large metal cabinet, Jupiter now activated the powerful fire extinguisher and fixed the spray lever with his shoelace so that a constant fountain of foam shot out. He wanted to let the loudly hissing device slide with a lot of momentum on the slippery ground into the opposite enclosure, about eight metres away, and thus lure the Komodo dragon inside. Without coming out of his cover, he thrust the fire extinguisher forward with all his might and shouted: “Surprise!”

Like a bizarre, wildly rotating foam fountain, the red metal cylinder spun metre by metre towards the opening—and at the last moment, the spray head collided with a ledge. The sudden counter-movement caused the fire extinguisher to roll sideways a few metres back into the corridor, additionally driven by the enormous foam output.

With an aggressive snarl, the lizard thundered towards it and snapped at the supposed threat with its enormous mouth. Unfortunately, this did not help at all, because it was still free and was now becoming more and more enraged by the white foaming object.

Jupiter thought feverishly about how he could still save the situation. And suddenly he had a flash of inspiration! He quickly took out the two special mobile phones and fiddled with them. He hoped that they had the same features as Garvine’s phone, and sure enough, after a few seconds he found the function he was looking for in the display menu: ‘Final Countdown’.

Jupiter wanted to hurl the mobile phones into the enclosure, so that the subsequent explosions and especially the colourful shower of sparks lured the lizard inside. The First Investigator knew that monitor lizards do not have good hearing, but he was confident that the noise and the bright sparks would attract the monster’s attention.

Hastily, Jupiter entered a five-second countdown on both phones and was about to press confirm when the reptile’s sudden silence made him pause in irritation. Cautiously, he stuck his head out to the left of the cabinet to see what had happened—and stared into the huge black eyes of the monster lizard only a few metres away!

The following seconds seemed to pass in slow motion for the First Investigator. While a renewed twitching at the animal’s flanks announced the imminent lunge of the monster, Jupiter activated the countdown and hurled the mobile phones in a high arc over the massive body of the reptile into the dark enclosure. He desperately hoped that the floor was covered with straw or something similar so that the phones would not shatter on impact without triggering the explosion.

Even before the phones hit, the Komodo dragon shot towards Juve, who now instinctively tore open a metal cabinet, pressed himself between the safety clothing hanging inside and slammed the door shut. Muffled by the massive cupboard walls, the First Investigator heard the monster thundering towards him while he counted down with trembling lips.

“... Three... Two... One...” In his mind’s eye, Jupiter could already see the giant lizard crushing him and his pitiful hiding place under its sheer weight, when suddenly there was an explosion in the background, followed by a rumbling hiss and a loud thud.

Jupiter listened intently for a moment to the silence that now fell—and flinched in fright when the door was suddenly yanked open.

“We did it!” cheered Bob, pointing excitedly to the opposite wall.

With weak knees, Jupiter stepped outside and was relieved to see that the monitor lizard had disappeared and the enclosure was firmly closed again. In a distance, the approaching footsteps of Mr Andrews could now be heard.



Bob exuberantly patted the First Investigator on the back. "Your idea with the mobile phones was a real masterstroke, well done!"

"Thanks for the flowers..." Jupiter replied dazedly, now feeling severe pain in his bandaged hand again. "But what about Pete?"

Instead of answering, Bob climbed onto one of the lab cubicles and kept a lookout for the fugitives. "They're over there! At the other end of the hall, on the far left! Pete is fighting with a security guard! They are obviously blocking the two ladies from getting out." Horrified, he widened his eyes. "Now one of the women is raising her arm in Pete's direction!"

"The remote control!" gasped Jupiter in dismay.

Bob waved his hands wildly. "What are we supposed to do now? We'll never make it there in time!"

"We may not have to," Bill Andrews replied, now standing in front of the large control panel. "These switches and lights are on a floor plan. If the labels are correct, the very back left should be..." He pressed a button, whereupon loud screams of terror suddenly sounded in the far distance. Determined, Bob's father pointed forward. "Now let's go!"

As fast as they could, the three of them ran to the end of the huge hall, where they found, to their great relief, that one guard was lying on the floor and Pete, grinning in victory, was holding the two completely stunned women at bay with the silver stun baton. Above their heads fluttered an estimated twenty bat-like animals with shiny black wings.

"Pete!" cried Bob joyfully. "Is everything all right?"

"Thanks to you, yes," replied the Second Investigator. "When a gate suddenly opened behind us and a whole cloud of fluttering animals shot out, the confusion was so great that I was able to snatch the remote control from Mrs Breckenridge and stun that guy there."

"So it worked out then," Mr Andrews noted with satisfaction. "I had hoped that these aerial acrobats would provide some distraction."

"A worthy finale indeed," Pete agreed with a wink. "By now, the lock barricades should be open again. There's a kind of main switch for all access points on this wonder stick."

As if to confirm this, several police officers, led by Officer Hogart, now entered the hall through an entrance behind them. The Three Investigators looked grimly over at the two ladies who was watching the arrival of the police with petrified faces.

Mr Andrews immediately briefed Officer Hogart on the developments. While the police officers carried out the necessary procedures to arrest the criminals, The Three Investigators regrouped.

"I am seriously impressed," Jupiter admitted with an ironic tone. "Our archaic poet not only has a firm grip, but also knows his way around Teumessian technology!"

"Just keep your blabbermouth in check," Pete admonished in mock sternness. "Remember—if you get on my nerves or Bob's in the future, we can shut you up in no time with the hypnosis trigger word."

"Exactly!" Wide-eyed, Bob leaned forward to the First Investigator and held out his hands like a magician. "Let's try it now—Cly—"

"Don't you dare!" cried Jupiter, grabbing his forehead. "I'm getting sweaty just thinking about it! As soon as we get through this adventure, I really must see an expert to erase this diabolical reflex from my mind." He then looked over at the psychologist who was now handcuffed. "However, that will definitely not be Maria Elena Fernandez. Her consultation hours are likely to be cancelled for a very long time..."

Just as Mrs Breckenridge and her accomplices, including Taylor-Jackson, were being led away by the police, Bill Andrews turned one last time to the deathly pale patroness and

looked at her with glittering eyes. “Countless times you have escaped your just punishment and secured your throne with money, lies and violence. But this time there is no escape for the Teumessian fox...”

Bob fell overjoyed around his father’s neck and his friends now approached as well.

A big smile was on Jupiter’s face. “It took seventeen years, but finally, the brave Laelaps succeeded in hunting down and capturing the Teumessian fox,” he remarked.

“... But not by himself.” Bill Andrews was also smiling now. “This time he has his son and two loyal friends by his side...”